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The Whole Scriptures.

BY

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CCXXI.

SOLOMON PUTS SHIMEI TO DEATH.

1 Kin. ii. 44. *The Lord shall return thy wickedness upon thine own head.*

FEW parts of Scripture have given more occasion for the cavils of infidels, than that which relates the close of David's life, and the commencement of Solomon's reign. Those who delight in disparaging the characters of all the most exalted Saints, represent David as dying under the influence of a vindictive spirit; and Solomon as beginning his reign with most flagrant acts of cruelty. But both the one and the other of these saints may be vindicated in what they did; yea rather their conduct must be highly approved, if only we view it in a proper light. Some indeed have vindicated David's advice, by saying, that though he had sworn to Shimei that he should not be put to death for his offence, Solomon was not bound by his oath. But I answer, that David was as much bound by his oath not to procure the death of Shimei through the instrumentality of another, as he was not to put him to death with his own hand. The true way of vindicating both David and Solomon in reference to all the seeming acts of severity which were recommended by the one and executed by the other, is by viewing them as acts of retributive justice. It is in that light that Solomon himself speaks of the execution of Shimei; and he even represents the punishment as inflicted not by himself only, but by God also.

In considering the subject of retributive justice, we shall shew,

I. How it *should be* exercised by *men*—

By men in their individual capacity, it should not be exercised at all—

[We are forbidden to think of retaliating an injury, or of avenging ourselves at all[a]. Yea rather we are taught patiently to bear injuries[b], and tenderly to requite them with acts of kindness[c]; and to persist in this conduct till we have melted our adversaries into shame, and overcome them with love[d]——— Our blessed Lord, who died for his very murderers, has "left us an example that we should follow his steps[e]"———]

But, as public men, we may, and must execute justice on those who transgress the laws—

[Magistrates are invested with authority by God himself for this very end: and they are "not to bear the sword in vain:" they are to be a terror to evil-doers, as well as a protection to those who do well.

Now this throws the true light on the advice which David gave to Solomon at the close of his life, and on the conduct which Solomon maintained. David was not actuated by revenge when he advised Solomon to put Joab to death, and to take the first opportunity of visiting on the head of Shimei the sins of which he had been guilty. David knew the characters of both: he knew that Joab would not fail to advance Adonijah to the throne, if ever it should be in his power; and that Shimei still cleaved to the house of Saul as much as ever, and would use all his influence in concert with Joab to dethrone Solomon: David therefore advised him to remove as soon as possible those who would destroy the peace and prosperity of his kingdom. As for Joab, he ought to have been put to death long ago, for the murders he had committed; and David had brought guilt on himself and the whole nation by suffering him to live: and therefore, now that there was no prospect of the people rising in favour of Joab, he recommended that justice should be executed upon him. That David was actuated by no bad spirit in this advice, appears from the charge he gave Solomon at the same time to walk in the strictest observance of God's commands. We may justly say therefore that the advice was precisely such as a dying monarch ought to have given to a young man, who was just ready to ascend the throne. In like manner Solomon was justified in all the steps he took to establish his kingdom. He had pardoned Adonijah for his conspiracy against him, on the express condition that he should act the part of a good and loyal subject:

[a] Prov. xxiv. 29. [b] Matt. v. 38, 41. [c] ib. ver. 44.
[d] Rom. xii. 19—21. [e] 1 Pet. ii. 21—24.

subject: but seeing speedily his restless ambition, and that the request to have Abishag for his wife was but a device to increase his influence in the state, and to pave the way for his attainment of the throne, he very properly recalled the promise he had made to Bathsheba respecting him, (which by no construction whatever could be supposed to extend to such a case as that); and inflicted on him that punishment which his treasonable intentions deserved.

In Adonijah's late conspiracy Abiathar and Joab had joined, though they all knew that the appointment of Solomon to the throne was not from any partiality in David, but from God himself. Solomon therefore now thrust out Abiathar from the priesthood, and banished him to his native town. This was a mild sentence, in consideration of the services he had rendered unto David in his afflictions.

Joab now saw that justice was coming home to him also: and he fled to the altar, hoping to find the same protection there that Adonijah had found before him: but he was a murderer; and God had expressly ordered that his altar should be no sanctuary for such persons[f]: accordingly Solomon ordered that, if he would not come from thence, he should be slain there; that so he might the more manifestly appear to be sacrificed to the justice of his God.

The person spoken of in our text is Shimei, who cursed David in the day of his calamity; but had received from David a free pardon for his offence. This was a very powerful man; for no less than a thousand men attended him when he came to ask pardon: and he retained all his former enmity to David, though he had not been able to manifest it with effect. Him therefore Solomon also pardoned, on condition that he should never go out of the city of Jerusalem, where he might be constantly under the eye of the government. This condition he thankfully accepted: but after three years he violated it, and thus forfeited his life, which Solomon therefore, agreeably to the advice given him by David, required at his hands.

Now, whilst we acknowledge that these acts of retributive justice would have been bad, if they had proceeded from a vindictive spirit, we must affirm that they were both just and necessary, in order to prevent disturbances in the state, and to secure the welfare of the whole nation.]

Such is the way in which retributive justice should be exercised by man. Let us now consider,

II. How it *will be* exercised by *God*—

God is the Sovereign of the universe: and though he bears long with his rebellious subjects, he often executes

[f] Exod. xxi. 14.

executes vengeance upon them in this world, as preparatory to the judgments he will inflict upon them in the world to come. In a peculiar manner, as our text expresses it, "he returns their wickedness upon their own head,"—

1. Here—

[Sometimes indeed sinners are left, as it were, wholly to themselves in this world: but even this is a mark of God's displeasure against them: "Ephraim," says he, "is joined to idols; let him alone[g]." They harden themselves against him, and he gives them up to judicial hardness, as he did Pharaoh of old[h]. "They will not believe his word, that they may be saved; and he gives them up to believe their own lie, that they may be damned[i]." "They will not hear him when he speaks to them; and he turns a deaf ear to them, when in the day of their calamity they cry to him;" thus leaving them to be "filled with their own devices[k]."

But in temporal judgments he often marks his indignation against them, and shews them their sin in their punishment. How strikingly was this shewn in the judgments inflicted on Adoni-bezek[l]! and how awfully was David made to behold his crimes in the matter of Bathsheba and Uriah, in the ravishment of Tamar by his son Amnon, in the defilement of all his concubines by his son Absalom, and in the murder of Amnon by Absalom! Thus we see now that multitudes are punished in a way so suited to their crimes, that they may even read their crimes in their punishment: their wicked examples are imitated by their children; and they are made to feel the bitterness of their own sins from the sins and calamities of their dearest relatives.

In all such instances we may behold the retributive justice of God. And though it would not be right for us to be hasty in putting this construction on the judgments inflicted upon others, we shall do well to examine how far our own trials may be so interpreted; and to take occasion from our afflictions to put away the sins which they are intended to chastise.]

2. Hereafter—

[Whether God overlook or punish our sins in this world, he will proceed according to strict equity against us in the world to come. The day of judgment is emphatically called, "the day of the revelation of the righteous judgment of God." Then shall every thing be taken into consideration, either to extenuate or aggravate our crimes: "The servant that knew his lord's will and did it not, shall be beaten with many stripes; whilst the more

[g] Hos. iv. 17. [h] Isai. vi. 9, 10. [i] 2 Thess. ii. 10—12.
[k] Prov. i. 24—31. [l] Judg. i. 6, 7.

more ignorant transgressor shall be beaten with few." Every one's "end will be according to his works:" he will be weighed in a perfect balance, and will "receive according to that he hath done in the body, whether it be good or evil." His views, his motives, his principles will all be judged: "God will make manifest the counsels of his heart:" and every one shall be constrained to confess that his doom is just— — —]

Let us then LEARN from this subject,

1. To be candid in judging others—

[A person looking only superficially at this history would be ready to condemn both David and Solomon for their conduct: but when we view their situation, and enter properly into their motives, we are constrained to approve it. Thus it must often happen. We see an action, but we do not exactly enter into all the circumstances that gave it birth: and therefore we judge erroneously respecting it. But we should leave all judgment to the Lord, who alone is able to decide on the motives and principles from which it springs. We must indeed of necessity pass judgment in many cases, where the crimes are so glaring that they cannot possibly be mistaken: but where there is the least ground for favourable interpretation, we should exercise that "charity which hopeth all things and believeth all things." That rule cannot be too strictly attended to, "Judge not, that ye be not judged."]

2. To be severe in judging ourselves—

[Here we are in little danger of excess. A person of a gloomy disposition may indeed write bitter things against himself without occasion; but, in general, self-love will lead us rather to extenuate every thing that is amiss, and to justify many things which God will condemn. Let us remember therefore, that God will not accommodate his judgment to ours: "he will judge righteous judgment:" "to him all things are naked and open:" "his eyes are as a flame of fire," that will search the inmost recessess of the heart, and try every disposition of the mind. Let us endeavour to bear in mind, that his eye is over us; and let us strive to walk as in his immediate presence. And let our every act and word and thought be regulated by the consideration, that the hour is quickly coming, when every the minutest circumstance of our lives will be brought to light, and our eternal state be fixed by a righteous and unerring God.]

CCXXII.

SOLOMON'S CHOICE.

1 Kin. iii. 11—14. *And God said unto him, Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment; behold, I have done according to thy word: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart, so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee. And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches and honour; so that there shall not be any among the kings like unto thee all thy days.*

SUCH is the condescension of Almighty God, that he not only conversed familiarly with man in a state of innocence, but even in his fallen state has talked with him as a man talketh with his friend. So free was the intercourse which he maintained with Abraham, that that patriarch was "called the friend of God." With Solomon too his communications were most familiar, as the instance recorded in our text will evince. Solomon, after he was seated on the throne of David his father, offered a thousand burnt-offerings at Gibeon, where God's principal altar was, previous to the building of the temple. After that pious work was performed, God visited him, and revealed himself to him in a dream or vision, and bade him ask any blessing that he chose; assuring him that it should certainly be granted. Solomon accepted the offer, and made known to God the request contained in our text.

Let us consider,

I. The choice of Solomon—

His request was for a more abundant measure of wisdom—

[In this request, he desired *intellectual* wisdom, whereby he might be fitted for all the duties and services of his high station. He was conscious, that, without this, he should but ill discharge the office to which God in his providence had called him. He felt the awful responsibility attached to the office of a monarch; and he longed to approve himself both able and faithful in the execution of his trust.

But

But it is evident that he desired *spiritual* wisdom also; for h wanted "to discern in all things between good and bad," which he could not do without a clear discovery of the Law, which is the only true test of good and evil.

Now this was a wise choice. He might, as God tells him, have asked for riches, or honour, or power over his enemies: but he felt that none of those things could make him happy, or render those happy who were committed to his care. Indeed we need only look at those who have been most famed for their conquests, and we shall find, that no acquisitions of wealth or territory could satisfy them; and that they have been no less a curse to the people they governed, than to those whom they endeavoured to subdue; since they sought only to gratify their own ambition at the expense of those, whose welfare they should have solely regarded. But without extending our views to them, we need only look within the narrow circle of our own acquaintance, and we shall see, that wisdom conduces more to the happiness of men, than all other things whatever. See the man that is enabled to conduct himself well in the most arduous affairs of life, how happy does he make all who are connected with him; especially, if he be endued with spiritual wisdom also, so as to have a spiritual discernment in every thing relating to God and man! What a light then shines around him; and what blessings does he communicate wherever he comes! Compare such an one with the great, the rich, the mighty, and he will be found far happier than them all.

This choice moreover was approved of God himself, who not only commended it as wise, but honoured it with a rich reward; giving him in a very abundant measure the blessing he desired*, and bestowing on him also those minor blessings which he had forborne to ask.]

From this brief view of Solomon's choice we may easily collect,

II. The instruction to be gathered from it—

It clearly shews,

1. That an ability to discharge our duty aright is the most desirable of all blessings—

[In whatever line of life we be, this will be found a truth. Persons in higher life may, if truly gracious, do extensive good: but wealth and power are abused, so as rather to diminish than augment the happiness of those who are within the sphere of their influence. Besides, in many cases, wealth and power can do no good at all; whereas wisdom is serviceable in every situation in which we can be placed; nor is there a man existing who may not be benefited by the possessor of it. "Wisdom," we are told,

* Chap. iv. 29—31.

told, "is profitable to direct:" and whilst it regulates the motions of others, it will enable a man to "guide his own affairs with discretion," and to "walk wisely before God in a perfect way[b]."

Need I say from how many difficulties and evils it will keep a man; or what peace and joy it will bring into the soul? Truly, as in the want of this not all the world can give any permanent satisfaction, so, in the absence of all other things, this will afford the richest comfort and support. We may well therefore say, that nothing in the universe is to be compared to it[c]. Would to God that the rich and great in every place made it, in the days of youth too, the one object of their pursuit!]

2. That it is the gift of God alone—

[Education will improve our talents; but it will never confer solid wisdom: *that* "cometh from above[d]." We may go to every creature in the universe, and they will all give us the same answer, "It is not in me; it is not in me[dd]." The man famed for wisdom almost as much as Solomon himself[e], has directed us to God as the only true source of all wisdom[f]. We must seek it therefore, not by study only, but by prayer; for "it is God that giveth wisdom; and out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding[g]." If any man could have derived it from any other source, surely Solomon might; seeing that he was naturally possessed of strong mental powers, and had the advantage of being instructed by the most pious and experienced of kings. But he felt that none but God could open the eyes of his understanding, or enrich him with that spiritual knowledge, which alone could qualify him for the discharge of his high office.]

3. That where a desire after it is supreme in the soul, God will signally honour and bless us—

[The desire after wisdom ought to be so predominant in the soul as to have no rival there: if it be not supremely coveted, the desire after it is not sincere. But where it is really sought as the supreme good, there God promises that he will grant it, yea and liberally too, if we come to him in faith, and ask it at his hands[h]. To desire this is the best way of obtaining other blessings in the measure that is good for us: for God promises, that, if we "seek spiritual blessings *first*, all other things shall be added unto us[i]." We are far from saying, that other things are not to be sought at all; we only say, that they must be regarded as altogether subordinate to spiritual blessings, and be valued only as they may be subservient to the advancing of God's honour

[b] Ps. ci. 2. [c] Prov. iii. 13—18. [d] Jam. i. 17.
[dd] See that eloquent passage, Job xxviii. 12—23.
[e] Ezek. xxviii. 3. [f] Dan. ii. 20, 21. [g] Prov. ii. 1—6.
[h] Jam. i. 5. Eph. iii. 20. [i] Matt. vi. 33.

honour and the good of mankind. *In this view*, riches, honour, and power may be desired; but in comparison of true wisdom, they must be regarded only as the small dust upon the balance.]

ADDRESS—

1. Those who are ambitious of earthly honours—

[Think but how speedily they will vanish, and you will raise your ambition to that which shall endure for ever[k] — — —]

2. To those who desire the approbation of their God—

[God makes the same offer to you that he did to Solomon[l]. Let your choice then be the same as his: and seek it with all the ardor and earnestness it deserves[m] — — — —]

[k] Ps. xc. 12. [l] John xiv. 13, 14. & xvi. 23, 24.
[m] Prov. iv. 5—7.

CCXXIII.

THE STILLNESS WITH WHICH THE TEMPLE WAS BUILT.

1 Kin. vi. 7. *And the house, when it was in building, was built of stone made ready before it was brought thither: so that there was neither hammer, nor axe, nor any tool of iron, heard in the house while it was in building.*

NEVER was there upon the face of the globe a building, that in point of elegance or grandeur could be compared with the temple of Solomon. It had been the desire of David to erect it; but he was forbidden of God to do so, because he had been engaged in many wars, and had shed much blood. God however approved of his desire, and told him, that his son should have the honour which was denied to him. Nevertheless David began immediately to make preparations for the building; and Solomon in three years after he came to the throne was ready to begin the work; which in somewhat more than seven years he was enabled to complete. There is, in the structure of this edifice, one circumstance so remarkable as to deserve very particular attention: the wood and stones were all prepared at a distance, and brought to the place perfectly fitted

fitted for the situation in which they were to stand: and with such unerring skill were they all framed, that, during the whole time of building the temple, there was no occasion for an axe or hammer to be used; and the whole structure was completed without the smallest noise. Now whoever considers the figurative nature of the Jewish dispensation must see, that such an extraordinary circumstance as this could not have happened from mere chance, or have occurred at all without some very important meaning. We doubt not but that it was intended by God to shadow forth some truths for the instruction of his Church in all ages. What these were, we cannot declare with certainty, because no inspired writer has specified them: but we apprehend that, whatever else this circumstance might intimate, it was particularly calculated to represent,

I. The perfection of God's designs—

[Every part of the edifice, and every vessel in it, was formed, as it were, in the mind of the divine Architect, long before Solomon or David ever entertained the thought of executing such a work. Before Moses constructed the tabernacle, there was a model set before him by God, and he was ordered to make every thing according to the pattern shewn to him in the mount[a]. A similar model was given by God to David, and shewn by him to Solomon, for the constructing of the temple[b]: so that, as existing in the divine mind, the work was perfect before it was begun.

Now this shews us what is really the case with respect to every thing in the whole creation. As the creation itself was all formed in the divine purpose, though it occupied six successive days to complete it, so all things to the very end of time are present in the mind of God, having been ordained of him before the foundation of the world.

We are aware that to many this appears "an hard saying:" but it is "a true saying:" for how could so many things have been foretold by Prophets in different and distant ages, if they had not been previously fixed in the purposes of God? Had there been any thing left to chance, some of these prophecies must have failed: but not even the minutest circumstance that has been predicted has ever failed: and this proves that God foresaw every thing that should ever come to pass; and that he foresaw it, not as probable, but as certain, and therefore certain, because he had ordained it. This is true respecting the vilest iniquities

[a] Exod. xxv. 40. [b] 1 Chron. xxviii. 11—13, 19.

iniquities of men, no less than their greatest virtues. The whole treatment which our blessed Lord should meet with, was foreseen, and fore-ordained; though the agents were perfectly free in their actions, and were as much accountable to God as if nothing had been foreseen or fore-ordained[c]. Nor is it only *unwittingly* that men have accomplished the divine purposes, but *against their will*: for Joseph's brethren were bent upon defeating the divine purposes, and yet actually accomplished them by the very means which they used to defeat them[d]. There do indeed appear on some occasions a change of the divine purpose, as in the sparing of Nineveh, and in the prolonging of Hezekiah's life: but these were not changes in the divine *purpose*, but changes in the divine *dispensations, agreeably to the purpose* which had been previously formed in the mind of God.

If this doctrine were not true, God would not be a perfect Being. If any thing were left unfixed in the divine counsels, God could not be omniscient, but would become wiser by the events of every successive day. But can any one doubt whether God be omniscient or not? Surely, as St. James declares, "Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world[e]." To deny that God possesses the attribute of foreknowledge, would be downright Atheism: and to separate this attribute from his pre-ordination appears to me inconsistent and impracticable: nor do they who take refuge in this distinction find themselves at all better able to reconcile their doctrine with the freedom of man's will, and his responsibility for his conduct, than those who consider every thing as fore-ordained: and if they get rid of some difficulties, they involve themselves in more and greater than they avoid. In truth the language of Scripture is so strong respecting the divine decrees, that it is not possible to explain away many passages which relate to them[f]. We acknowledge that the subject is deep, and far beyond the comprehension of man: we would therefore never speak of it but with the deepest reverence; nor ever without reminding our hearers, that it is with the divine *commands*, and not the divine *decrees*, that they have to do: it is to *those*, and not to *these*, that they must look, as the rule of their actions. Still however we dare not deny that God is the Sovereign of the universe, who acts in all things "according to the counsel of his own will, and for the praise of the glory of his own grace[g];" and though we would by no means make this a prominent subject of our ministrations, yet we cannot but think that the occasional contemplation of this mystery is, as our Article expresses it, "full of pleasant, sweet, and unspeakable comfort."]

Besides the perfection of God's designs, we see prefigured in this account,

II. The

[c] Acts ii. 23. [d] Gen. xlv. 5. & l. 20. [e] Acts xv. 18.
[f] Isai. xlvi. 9—11. Eph. i. 4, 5, 9, 11. & iii. 9, 11. [g] ib.

II. The mode in which they are accomplished—

[The stillness with which the work of the temple proceeded intimated the still and silent way in which God carries on all his works, in *the world*, in *the Church*, and in *the souls of men*.

In *the world* we behold *men* carrying on *their* designs with great noise and tumult: but *God* is secretly and silently effecting *his own* purposes in the midst of all. The four great empires, the Chaldean, Persian, Grecian, and Roman, successively rose on the ruins of that which preceded it; but none of the conquerors imagined whose counsels they were fulfilling, or whose instruments they were. Sennacherib boasted what victories he had gained; but he was only an axe or saw in the hand of Omnipotence[h]. We shall have a perfect insight into this matter, if we look at the transactions which took place at the death of Christ: all parties followed the bent of their own hearts; but all accomplished with the utmost possible exactness the counsels of the Most High. God spake not to them by any audible voice to direct them; nor did he interpose in any visible way to guide their motions; but he presided in the storm, and overruled every disposition of their hearts for the accomplishment of his own eternal purpose[i]. And it is a most consolatory thought, that, in all the great events which are now taking place in the world, "the counsel of God shall stand, and he will do all his will."

In *the Church* more especially does God carry on his work in this way. It was said of our Lord, that he should "not lift up his voice, nor cause it to be heard in the street[k]:" he was to found his kingdom upon earth by a secret and invisible influence on the minds of men. His Apostles also were to go forth in dependence on that power, and by their simple testimony, to convert the world unto him. In their attempts to subdue men to the obedience of faith, they were to use "no carnal weapons," but only such as should derive their efficacy from the grace of Christ[l]; agreeably to that prophetic declaration, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts[m]." Accordingly it was in this way that they prevailed over all the power and policy of earth and hell: and in this way will Christ continue to extend his conquests, "till all his enemies be put under his feet."

In the same way also does God accomplish his purposes in *the souls of men*. It is "not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire, that God manifests himself to them, but in the still small voice[n]." The "seed sown in their hearts, groweth up, they know not how:" changes occur, which threaten to destroy it; but still it survives, and springs up, and brings forth fruit in its season. This operation is compared by our Lord to leaven, which

continues

[h] Isai. x. 5—7, 13—15. & xxxvii. 24—27.
[i] Acts iv. 27, 28. [k] Isai. xlii. 2. [l] 2 Cor. x. 4, 5.
[m] Zech. iv. 6. [n] 1 Kin. xix. 11, 12.

continues to spread, till it has diffused itself through the whole mass. Thus does the grace of God silently, but progressively, renew the whole man, till we are changed into the very image of our God.]

From this subject we may LEARN,

1. What ought to be the character of our religion—

[Nothing is more common, and nothing more delusive, than a noisy, talkative religion. True religion is a humble, silent, retired thing, not affecting public notice, but rather wishing to approve itself to God[o]. It is "not in saying Lord, Lord, but in doing the will of our heavenly Father," that we shall find acceptance in the last day. Happy would it be, if many, who place all their religion in running about, and hearing sermons, and talking of the qualifications of Ministers, and disputing about religious opinions, would attend to this hint, and endeavour to acquire more of that wisdom which evinces its divine origin by the excellence of its fruits[p]!]

2. How we should judge of growth in grace—

[We would not undervalue the inward feelings of the heart: but, if not accompanied with more substantial evidences of piety, they are very deceitful. We should examine whether we are fitted for the duties of our respective stations. Of all the stones in the temple, there was not one which did not exactly suit its place: so will it be with us, if we have really been wrought upon by the Spirit of God: whether we be parents or children, masters or servants, magistrates or subjects, true grace will lead us to discharge our own duties aright. This is properly to act as members of a body, all fitly framed together, all performing their proper functions, and all contributing to the good of the whole[q]. That this idea is just, as arising from the present subject, is certain; for both St. Peter and St. Paul have placed the subject in this very point of view[r]. Let us therefore particularly attend to it; and whilst we all profess to stand on the same foundation, and to be connected together by one Corner-stone, let us approve ourselves "*living* stones," by contributing as much as possible to the union, the beauty, the stability, and advancement of the whole building.]

3. How the dispensations of God will appear in the last day—

[A person who should have seen the materials of the temple in their rough state, would have formed no conception of their appearance after they were all fashioned by the workmen, and placed in the order appointed by the divine Architect: but when the

[o] Ps. cxxxi. 2. with Jam. i. 26.
[p] Jam. iii. 17.
[q] Eph. iv. 15, 16.
[r] 1 Pet. ii. 4, 5. Eph. ii. 20—22.

the whole building was completed, it was the wonder of the world. Thus at present we have a very imperfect conception of the beauty of God's Church, or of his wisdom in all his various dispensations: but when his temple shall be complete in heaven, what a glorious edifice will it appear! How will each admire the way in which he was taken out of the quarry, and formed for the particular place that is allotted him! Here men are apt to wonder, why they must have so many and so severe blows: but there none will think that he has had one stroke too much, or more than was absolutely necessary to fit him for his place: if by the most painful experiences he may have been formed for a more conspicuous station in the temple above, he will feel no regret at any thing he suffered in the body, but will adore the heavenly Workman, that condescended to use such means for his advancement. Let us then, if any thing perplex us now, remember that we see only in part; and be contented to wait till that day, when "God shall be glorified in all his saints, and be admired in all them that believe."]

CCXXIV.

SOLOMON'S THANKSGIVING PRAYER.

1 Kin. viii. 54—61. *And it was so, that when Solomon had made an end of praying all this prayer and supplication unto the Lord, he arose from before the altar of the Lord, from kneeling on his knees with his hands spread up to heaven. And he stood, and blessed all the congregation of Israel with a loud voice, saying, Blessed be the Lord, that hath given rest unto his people Israel, according to all that he promised; there hath not failed one word of all his good promise, which he promised by the hand of Moses his servant! The Lord our God be with us, as he was with our fathers: let him not leave us, nor forsake us; that he may incline our hearts unto him, to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments, and his statutes, and his judgments, which he commanded our fathers. And let these my words, wherewith I have made supplication before the Lord, be nigh unto the Lord our God day and night, that he maintain the cause of his servant, and the cause of his people Israel at all times, as the matter shall require; that all the people of the earth may know that the Lord is God, and that there is none else. Let your heart therefore be perfect with the Lord your God, to walk in his statutes, and to keep his commandments, as at this day.*

TO men Solomon might appear most glorious when seated on his throne, and surrounded by all his

his courtiers: but in the eyes of God he never was so glorious, as when he was leading the devotions of all his people, and imploring blessings on them from above. Neither actuated by ostentation, nor restrained by shame, he erected a stage or pulpit in the court of the temple near the altar, and there in the midst of all the congregation kneeled down upon his knees, and with his hands stretched out to heaven poured forth his soul in the devoutest supplications. The prayer he uttered was of considerable length, and, as it should seem, the extemporaneous effusion of his own heart. How happy would it be, if all our kings were so disposed, or even if all the Ministers of the sanctuary were alike earnest in their acknowledgment of God, and qualified to conduct, from the abundance of their own hearts, the service of his sanctuary!

After having offered to God his prayer and supplication, he rose from his knees to bless the people. By "blessing them" we are not to suppose that he pretended to have any fulness in himself, whereby to make them blessed: it is not in man, however great, to make others blessed; he can only ministerially declare what God has promised, or implore in their behalf the blessing of God upon them. This is what was done by the priests of old[a], and this is what he did on this occasion.

The words in which he blessed them contain,

I. An address to God—

This consisted of two parts,

1. A thanksgiving for mercies received—

[God had now fulfilled in its utmost extent the promises which he had given to Israel. "The whole land, from the river of Egypt to the river Euphrates[b]," was under Solomon's dominion: the most perfect rest and peace prevailed throughout the whole empire[c]: and a place was now erected, on a spot chosen by God himself, for his worship and service[d]. Of "all the promises which God had given by Moses, not one word had failed:" all was come to pass; and the whole nation enjoyed a state of unprecedented prosperity. For these things Solomon now "blessed

[a] Numb. vi. 23—26. [b] Gen. xv. 18. with Deut. xi. 24.
[c] 1 Kin. v. 4. [d] Deut. xii. 11.

"blessed the Lord," both in his own name, and in the name of all the people.

Have *we* received such blessings from the Lord? let *us* then bless him too. Have we a peaceable enjoyment of God's ordinances, and freedom from the assaults of open enemies? Have we union also and harmony amongst ourselves? let us be thankful for these mercies: it is not every Church that enjoys them; nor can any thing but the peculiar favour of Heaven continue them to us.

But what if we have experienced an accomplishment of that promise of our Lord, "Come unto me, and I will give you rest?" What if we have obtained a victory over all our spiritual enemies, and be living in a sweet sense of God's love, and the habitual enjoyment of his presence? Shall not *we* bless the name of our God, yea, bless him too with all our faculties and all our powers? — — —]

2. A prayer for the continuance of them—

[The presence of God with them comprehended every blessing that Solomon could desire; and therefore Solomon intreated God "never to leave them nor forsake them[e]." This alone could "incline their hearts" to serve the Lord[f]: this alone could secure to them a complete enjoyment of their happiness[g]: this alone could enable them to glorify their God in the world[h].

And what can any one desire more in *your* behalf? If "God be with you," and operate in you effectually for these ends and purposes, you are blessed, you must be blessed for ever. On the contrary, "Woe be to them," saith God, "when I depart from them[i]!" Yes, if he depart, we shall have no more "inclination to walk in his ways," but shall surely "walk after the imagination of our own evil hearts:" we shall no more be able to "maintain our own cause" against our spiritual adversaries, but shall fall a prey to every lust: we shall no more constrain the world to admire "the exceeding grace of God in us," but shall rather cause them "to blaspheme his holy name."

May God therefore bless you with his continued presence and his effectual grace!]

This address to God he concluded with,

II. An exhortation to the people—

Solomon would not dismiss the people without exhorting them to perform their duties to God, who had so loaded them with his richest benefits: he therefore besought them,

1. To be perfect with the Lord—

[Absolute perfection is not to be attained in this world[k]:" but

[e] ver. 57. [f] ver. 58. [g] ver. 59. [h] ver. 60.
[i] Hos. ix. 12. [k] Eccl. vii. 20. Jam. iii. 2.

but there is a perfection which every Christian must attain, a perfection of desire, of purpose, and of endeavour. We should see such a beauty in holiness as to long for the utmost possible attainment of it: we should *desire* to "be holy as God is holy," and "perfect as our Father which is in heaven is perfect." At this too we should *aim*: the great object of our lives should be to mortify every thing that is contrary to God's will, and to get his law perfectly engraved upon our hearts. To be "cast into the very mould of the Gospel," and to be "renewed after the perfect image of our God in righteousness and true holiness," should be the ambition of our souls. After this also should we *labour*; never thinking that we have attained any thing, whilst any thing remains to be attained. This was the state of the Apostle Paul[l], and must be the state of every one that would be approved of his God[m].

Is it thought by any, that, in requiring this, we require too much? I ask, For what has "God given us such exceeding great and precious promises," but that "by them we may be partakers of the divine nature, and escape the corruption that is in the world through lust[n]?" I ask again, What is the use which God teaches us to make of his promises? Is it not to "cleanse ourselves by their means from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God[o]?" I ask yet farther, What is the desire which every pious Minister will feel in behalf of his people; and to what will he endeavour, both in his private prayers and his public labours, to bring them? Is it not, "that they may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God[p]?" Away then with all apprehensions that we require too much: we require only what God requires, and what every soul that shall ever be saved, must possess: in actual attainments there will, in spite of our utmost exertions, be much lacking; but in desire, purpose, and endeavour, we must be perfect, not willingly harbouring the smallest imperfection[q], but striving to "grow up into Christ in all things, as our living Head."]

2. To preserve continually the frame they now possessed—

[The people now, as well as their king, were in a very devout and heavenly frame: there was nothing they would not now have done, or sacrificed, for the honour of their God. Solomon therefore says to them, "Be perfect with the Lord, *as at this day*." Now there are times when every godly person has felt himself more especially alive to the concerns of eternity: he has been humbled in the dust, under a sense of his own guilt and helplessness; he has been filled with admiration at the divine goodness

[l] Phil. iii. 12—14. [m] ib. ver. 15. [n] 2 Pet. i. 4.
[o] 2 Cor. vii. 1. [p] Col. iv. 12. [q] 1 Chron. xxviii. 9.

goodness to him; he has longed to have God ever with him, and to find all his happiness in the presence of his God. If such, then, have ever been our state, is there not the same reason that it should be so now? Does God deserve less at our hands, than he did at the period referred to? Why then do we not feel the same towards him? Perhaps we may be disposed to look back upon such seasons with complacency; but we should rather look upon all other seasons with shame and sorrow. O labour, Brethren, to preserve upon your minds those better feelings which you have at any time experienced; and, instead of declining from them, to get them revived and strengthened from day to day.

Such is the blessing, which, were it at our disposal, we would bestow upon you; and such is the blessing which we intreat of God to confer on every one amongst you.]

CCXXV.

THE QUEEN OF SHEBA'S VISIT TO SOLOMON.

1 Kings x. 6, 7. *And she said to the king, It was a true report that I heard in mine own land, of thy acts, and of thy wisdom. Howbeit I believed not the words, until I came, and mine eyes had seen it; and behold, the half was not told me.*

IT not unfrequently happens, that when the mind has been raised in any extraordinary degree by the representations of others, its expectations are disappointed: either the excellencies which appeared so fascinating to others, have been over-rated; or they are found blended with such defects, as greatly lessen their value. This is particularly the case with respect to the characters of men; in estimating which, it is easy to conceive, that our admiration may be too great, and our applause be too unqualified. But, in the passage before us, we have an instance where report, though heightened to the utmost, fell short of the reality. The wisdom of Solomon had attracted the attention of all the nations around him; insomuch that persons were sent from all the surrounding potentates, to ascertain whether the reports concerning him were true[a]: and in the chapter before us, we are informed, that a Queen of great power and authority came herself, in order to see

[a] Ch. iv. 34.

see with her own eyes, and hear with her own ears, the wonderful things which had been reported to her: and her testimony, after the fullest investigation, was, not only that all was true which had been told her, but that the half had not been told her; so greatly did the truth exceed her most sanguine expectations.

This circumstance deserves particular consideration, not merely for the honour of Solomon, but chiefly for the honour of Him whom Solomon prefigured, even of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Let us notice then,

I. The surprise occasioned by an acquaintance with Solomon—

We do not know the precise reports which the Queen of Sheba had heard; but they related principally, we apprehend, to the wisdom of Solomon. His splendor and magnificence indeed were unparalleled; but his wisdom was that which most of all induced her to come so far; for "she came to prove him with hard questions," and "to commune with him of all that was in her heart." Now "his wisdom excelled that of all mankind[b]:" it was not confined to any one branch of science, but embraced the whole extent of philosophy, natural and political, moral and religious. It extended, I say, to things,

1. Natural—

[Universal nature seemed, as it were, to be open to his view: "He spake of trees, from the cedar-tree that is in Lebanon, even to the hyssop that springeth out of the wall: he spake also of beasts and of fowl, and of creepings things, and of fishes[c]." The distinctive properties of each in their several classes were comprehended by him; but whether from study or from revelation, we do not know: such knowledge however, though curious and entertaining, was probably in point of utility the lowest that he possessed. Still it could not fail to interest an inquisitive mind, and to excite an high admiration of him in the breast of this intelligent Queen.]

2. Political—

[The perfection of his laws, the equity of his administration, the penetration exercised by him in his judicial capacity, the

[b] ib. ver. 30, 31. [c] ib. ver. 33.

the order in which every thing, whether in his civil or domestic concerns, was arranged; the grandeur of his edifices, the splendor of his court, the peacefulness of his reign, the prosperity of his people, and the whole extent of his political economy, bespoke him almost more than human; and made the admiring Queen envy the lowest of his servants, who were honoured with access to his presence[d].]

3. Moral—

[He had spoken three thousand proverbs, and composed above a thousand songs[e]. What depths of wisdom were contained in these we may judge from those which have come down to us. The whole subject of ethics was familiar to his mind, so that he needed not to draw conclusions in a way of rational argumentation, but was enabled to declare with unerring certainty the duty of man in every relation, and in every circumstance of life. The most difficult cases were easy to his comprehensive mind; and the clouds with which they were enveloped were dispelled by him as before the rising sun. We wonder not that, when she heard his oracular discourses, she was lost in utter amazement.]

4. Religious—

[This, after all, was the wisdom by which the Queen of Sheba sought most to profit: "When she heard of the fame of Solomon *concerning the name of the Lord*, she came to prove him with hard questions[f]." Earnestly did she desire to be informed concerning the nature and perfections of God; and the way in which he was to be worshipped; and how a sinner might find acceptance with him. These and numberless other points Solomon no doubt opened to her with such clearness and perspicuity, as carried the fullest conviction to her mind. Nor can we doubt but that as she would inquire respecting the sacrifices and oblations, he would point out to her the figurative nature, and typical intent, of every thing that she beheld; the temple, its furniture, its ordinances, its ministers, its service altogether. Glorious would be the opportunity afforded him of commending to her the God of Israel, and of pointing out to her that Messiah in whom all these types should receive their accomplishment; and no doubt he availed himself of it. Well therefore might such transcendent wisdom overwhelm her with astonishment, so that "there was no more spirit in her[g]:" and well might she say, that "the half had not been told her."]

Let us now turn from Solomon, to contemplate,

II. The surprise which an acquaintance with Jesus Christ will occasion—

Our views must not be confined to Solomon; for beyond

[d] ver. 4, 5, 8. [e] Ch. iv. 32. [f] ver. 1. [g] ver. 5.

beyond all doubt "a greater than Solomon is here." Solomon was an eminent type of Christ; as is clear from many passages of Scripture, and especially the 72d Psalm, which is not more applicable to Solomon in the letter of it, than it is to Christ in the spirit. Solomon was the first who could be called "a king, and a king's son;" and therefore a fit type of that Son of David who is "King of Kings, and Lord of Lords."

Now of Jesus are great things spoken in the holy Scriptures: and as the Queen of Sheba "believed not the reports concerning Solomon, till she came to see him with her own eyes," so repecting Jesus it must be said, "Who hath believed our report[h]?" But if once we behold him with the eye of faith, we shall then indeed say that the half had not been told us. Two things in particular we shall be amazed at;

1. The glory of his person—

[Let us behold him in his whole office and character, and so behold him as to have any just conception of his excellency, and we shall be altogether lost in wonder, so that there will be "no more spirit in us." Even in his *human* nature, wherein the glory of his Majesty is veiled, we are utterly astonished at all his spotless perfections. His wisdom, his goodness, his love, and all his other virtues, surpass our utmost conceptions. In the view of him many hundreds of years before he came into the world, the Church exclaimed, "He is chiefest among ten thousand," "he is altogether lovely[i]." In his *divine* nature, "he is the brightness of his Father's glory, and the express image of his person[k]" ——— In his *Mediatorial* character, he is "the power of God and the wisdom of God[l]." He has within himself all fulness treasured up[m]: nothing is wanting that can secure the happiness and salvation of his redeemed people. His meritorious sacrifice is a sufficient satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. His unspotted righteousness affords a robe, whereby all the fallen race of Adam may "cover their nakedness," and stand spotless in the presence of an holy God. In him is a fountain of all grace, from which every believer may receive an inexhaustible supply[n]. Let us only "behold, I say, his glory, as the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth[o]," and we shall immediately exclaim with the Prophet, "How great is his goodness, how great is his beauty[p]!"]

2. The

[h] Rom. x. 16. [i] Cant. v. 10, 16. [k] Heb. i. 3.
[l] 1 Cor. i. 24. [m] Col. i. 24. [n] John i. 16.
[o] ib. ver. 14. [p] Zech. ix. 9, 17.

2. The felicity of his people—

[This in particular was contemplated by the Queen of Sheba in reference to Solomon. After saying to him, "Thy wisdom and thy prosperity exceed the fame which I heard," she added, "Happy are thy men, happy are these thy servants, which stand continually before thee, and that hear thy wisdom[q]." But with how much greater propriety may this be said respecting the servants of the Lord Jesus Christ! Much is said of it indeed in the Scriptures[r]; but little of it is believed, till it is known by actual experience. But let it once be *felt*, and truly we shall say, "The half had not been told us." Indeed the Scriptures speak of it in this very view: their peace *passeth all understanding;*" and their "joy is *unspeakable* and *glorified.*" To this, as well as to the mysteries of faith, may we apply those words of the Apostle, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him: but God hath revealed them to us by his Spirit[s]." It is to what is experienced *in this world* that those words are to be applied: but if we look forward to the eternal world, with what emphasis may we pronounce them then! If the glory of Christ be so bright when beheld only through the dark medium of faith, how will it appear when we shall behold him face to face! And if our happiness be so great now that we carry about with us a body of sin and death, what shall it be, when our corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and we shall possess without alloy the full fruition of our God! Happy, happy beyond conception shall we be, when we are enabled to say, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee."]

This subject furnishes us with abundant matter,

1. For reproof—

[It was in this view that our Lord himself improved it in his day[t]: and may not we take up the same complaint against you and say, "The Queen of the South (of Sheba) shall rise up in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for she came from the utmost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold a greater than Solomon is here?" How little is Christ sought after and admired amongst us! The Queen of Sheba counted no expense or trouble too great to obtain an acquaintance with Solomon; but we grudge any labour that may be necessary to bring us to an acquaintance with Christ: almost any thing is a sufficient excuse to keep us from the public ordinances, and especially to make us neglect the private duties of religion. O let us blush and be ashamed, that when our means of access to Christ are so easy, we are so indifferent about

[q] ver. 7, 8. [r] Ps. lxxxix. 15—17. [s] 1 Cor. ii. 9, 10.
[t] Matt. xii. 42.

about him; that we rest contentedly without the knowledge of him, when, if we judged aright, "we should count all things but dung in comparison of it!" The Queen of Sheba did not consider even the affairs of a large empire of sufficient importance to keep her from seeking an interview with Solomon: let nothing detain us from visiting the Lord Jesus. To sit at his feet and hear his gracious instructions should be regarded by us as "the one thing needful[x]."]

2. For encouragement—

[That the Queen of Sheba derived much spiritual benefit from her visit to Solomon is manifest, from the manner in which she adored Jehovah for his mercy and grace in raising Solomon to the throne of Israel[y]. And will the Lord Jesus Christ suffer any one to "seek *his* face in vain?" Are we not told, "Then shall ye know, if ye follow on to know the Lord?" and, "The meek he will guide in judgment, the meek he will teach his way?" Let us take encouragement and go unto him; for we have advantages which the Queen of Sheba had not. Solomon could impart knowledge to her, but could not enable her to comprehend it: but Jesus can both "open to us the Scriptures," and "open our understandings also to understand them:" yea, and if we go humbly unto him, he will return with us to our respective homes, and be our instructor even unto death. Let us then "buy the truth," whatever it may cost us, and "not sell it" for the whole world. Methinks the Queen of Sheba never afterwards regretted the labour she had bestowed on that great object; and sure I am that none who seek the Lord, shall ever have to complain that "they have laboured in vain, or spent their strength for nought[z]."]

[x] Phil. iii. 8. [x] Luke x. 42. [y] ver. 9. [z] Isai. xlix. 4.

CCXXVI.

SOLOMON'S FALL.

1 Kin. xi. 9. *And the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart was turned from the Lord God of Israel, which had appeared unto him twice.*

IF we had beheld the temple of Solomon, with all its exquisite workmanship, destroyed, as soon as it was finished, methinks we should have wept over it as a calamity never to be forgotten. But we are now called to survey a far more grievous desolation, even the destruction of the fairest edifice that ever was raised,—the soul of Solomon. Most eminently had

had the grace of God wrought in him, as all his preceding history informs us. Since the foundation of the world there was not a grander spectacle, than that of Solomon elevated on a brazen platform in the midst of the temple, and crying unto God with bended knees and out-stretched hands in the behalf of himself and people to their latest posterity. But "how is the gold become dim, and the most fine gold changed!" We behold in nature some clouds occasionally obscuring the brightest sky, and sometimes even the meridian sun eclipsed; but here was such an eclipse as never had been seen, since Adam fell in paradise: here was the brightest day turned suddenly into the darkest night; the most eminent of saints relapsing into a state of most aggravated and abiding transgression.

Let us turn, like Abraham surveying the ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah the morning after they were destroyed[a], and contemplate,

I. The fall of Solomon—

In order to get a just view of it, let us distinctly notice,

1. How it began—

[It began the very instant he was raised to the throne, though in a way that was not perceived by him at the time. We do not condemn him for marrying Pharaoh's daughter, because we take for granted that she was a proselyte to the Jewish faith. That she was so, may be presumed from the very circumstance of his connexion with her; for we cannot conceive that he would have so grossly violated the divine law as to marry an heathen woman, at the very time that his piety was so transcendently conspicuous: and this presumption is confirmed by the circumstance, that amongst all the idolatrous temples that he built for his other wives, he never erected any for the idols of Egypt. But the evil of which he was guilty in the commencement of his reign was, the offering of sacrifice in high places, instead of confining himself to the altar which was in the tabernacle. We are decidedly of opinion that he should not have done this himself, nor should he have suffered his people to do it[b]; and we are persuaded that this error, continued as it was for eleven years at least, rendered him less averse than he would otherwise have

[a] Gen. xix. 27, 28.

[b] Compare 1 Kin. iii. 1—3. with Deut. xii. 2—6.

have been, to the erection of temples afterwards to heathen gods.

Other evils of his which gradually crept in, were, the multiplying of gold and silver *for himself;* the multiplying of horses also, and that *from Egypt;* and, above all, the multiplying of wives. All of these things were forbidden in as plain and express a manner as could be conceived[c]: yet, as if he had never read any such prohibition in the word of God, did he go on violating it from day to day[d].]

2. To what an extent it proceeded—

[There was not any thing more strongly prohibited in the Law than the forming of connexions with heathen women[e]: yet it was not from among the women of his own nation that he took his wives and concubines, but from among the "Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites." What an astonishing infatuation was here! Perhaps in the first two or three instances he might hope to convert them, as Pharaoh's daughter had been converted: but after having broken down the fence of the divine law, he roved afterwards at pleasure throughout the world. Soon the consequences which might have been expected, ensued: his heart was drawn away from God; and he not only *suffered them* to commit idolatry in the land, but he even *favoured* their idolatry, and actually *built temples* for their gods, and that too even *in Jerusalem itself*, where Jehovah's temple was: nor did he do this only for one or two whom he peculiarly favoured, but "*for all* his strange wives:" yea, incredible as it may appear, he *actually united with them in the worship of their idols*, and alienated to them the affections due only to the God of Israel[f]. Who that had seen Solomon at the dedication of the temple, would ever have conceived that he should fall at last to such a degraded state as this?

3. With what aggravations it was attended—

[Solomon had from a child been eminently beloved of the Lord: God had even given him the name Jedidiah in token of that love[g]. He had been especially appointed to build the temple of the Lord[h]: and both before and after he had built the temple, was honoured with peculiar visits from God himself[i]. In the latter of these visits God had strongly warned him against the

[c] Deut. xvii. 16, 17.

[d] In amassing gold, not, as David, for *the Lord*, but for *his own aggrandisement:* see chap. x. 21. In increasing horses; see ch. iv. 26. & x. 26. and especially from Egypt; see ch. x. 28. In multiplying wives; see ver. 3. [e] Deut. vii. 3, 4.

[f] ver. 4—8. His wives *turned away his heart* after other gods ... he *went after Astoreth* &c. [g] 2 Sam. xii. 24, 25.

[h] 1 Chron. xxii. 9, 10. [i] Compare 1 Kin. iii. 5. with ib. ix. 2.

the very evils which he afterwards committed[j]: and yet did Solomon very speedily rush into the commission of them[k]. Now these things God himself notices as aggravations of his guilt: he complains, that Solomon did these things "after God had appeared to him twice, and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not do it." Surely such ingratitude and impiety were scarcely ever combined in any other child of man !]

4. With what consequences it was followed—

[" God was angry with him," as well he might be; and he declared to Solomon that the kingdom of which he had rendered himself so unworthy, should be taken from him, and given to a servant of his[l]. This judgment however should be both deferred and mitigated; yet not for his sake, but for his father David's sake. Great as David's crimes had been in the matter of Uriah, he had never for a moment countenanced idolatry; and therefore *for his sake* should two of the tribes be reserved for his descendants, whilst the other ten should be rent away from them; and *for his sake*, the evil should be deferred, till Solomon himself should be removed into the eternal world[m]. Thus was the very mitigation of the punishment as humiliating, as the denunciation of it was painful. Immediately did God stir up adversaries to Solomon, to disquiet his peaceful reign, and to embitter the remainder of his days[n]. What the event of his transgression was in the eternal world, we cannot certainly declare. We hope and believe that Solomon repented, and was forgiven; (the book of Ecclesiastes seems to have been written after this period, and to contain the evidence of his repentance:) but there is no express mention of any such thing; so that it must remain uncertain till the day of judgment, whether he was not left to suffer the everlasting displeasure of an offended God. What a fearful thought! that so bright a sun should set at last under so dark a cloud !]

Inexpressibly awful is the account here given us. Let us now proceed to consider,

II. The instruction to be gathered from it—

Never was a history more replete with instruction than this. We may learn from it,

1. That temporal prosperity is very unfavourable for spiritual advancement—

[Doubtless

[j] 1 Kin. ix. 3—7.

[k] He had reigned at least twenty years before the second visit. Ch. ix. 1, 10.

[l] ver. 11. [m] ver. 12, 13.

[n] ver. 14, 23, 26—33.

[Doubtless the facility with which Solomon could gratify all his natural appetites, rendered him the more easy prey to his own corruptions: and as his carnal gratifications increased, his spiritual affections would decay. And do we not find it thus in all ages? Adversity has been a source of benefit to thousands; but few have ever been permanently quickened by prosperity. If we look into the Church of God, we shall find innumerable instances of persons, who have suffered loss in their souls, in proportion as their wealth or honours have been increased: "The cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lust of other things have choked the word, and rendered it unfruitful." The account given of Jeshurun[o] contains the history of many; over whose tombs it might be inscribed, "The prosperity of fools destroys them[p]."

Let us not then covet earthly gains or honours: they are but as "thick clay" around the feet of one that runneth in a race[q], or as a garment that obstructs the motion of his legs[r] — — —]

2. That however advanced any man may be in age or piety, he is still in danger of falling—

[It is said of Solomon, that, "*when he was old*, his wives turned away his heart[s]." Had it been in the days of his youth, we should have the less wondered at his folly; because versatility of mind is incident to that time of life: but after years of wisdom and piety, to turn in old age to such extreme folly and wickedness, what shall we say? Well may we exclaim, "Lord, what is man?" Can any thing speak more loudly to us than this? Can any thing more strongly enforce that warning of the Apostle, "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall?" O "let us not be high-minded, but fear." "Let us fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into God's rest, any of us should seem to come short of it." This is certain, that, as our wickedness shall not be remembered if we truly turn from it, so "neither shall our righteousness be remembered if we turn from that." It is not he who "runs well for a season," but "he who endures unto the end, that shall be saved." If we turn back, at whatever period of our life it be, "we turn back unto perdition." Let all of us then cry to God, "to hold up our goings in his paths, that our footsteps slip not." Our motto to the last must be, "Hold thou me up, and I shall be safe." To all then, whatever eminence they may have attained, I would say, as our Lord did to his Disciples, not only "Remember Lot's wife," but, Remember the fall of Solomon.]

3. That smaller sins, if not guarded against in time, will issue in the greatest—

[Solomon

[o] Deut. xxxii. 15. [p] Prov. i. 32. [q] Hab. ii. 6.
[r] Heb. xii. 1. εὐπερίστατον ἁμαρτίαν. [s] ver. 4.

[Solomon might frame some excuse to himself for the sins in which his fall commenced: he worshipped on high places, *because the temple was not yet built:* he multiplied wives and concubines, *because his father had had several before him:* he procured much gold, and a multitude of horses, *because they would add to the splendor of his court, and perhaps also to his security.* But he found at last what a dangerous thing it is to tamper with sin, or to deviate knowingly even an hair's breadth from the divine commandments. Sin will soon blind the eyes, and harden the heart, and sear the conscience. Sin is a downward road, whereon, if we fall, our descent may soon be accelerated beyond a possibility of recovery. A leak may appear but a small thing; yet will it sink a ship, if left without timely repair. The voice of inspiration suggests to us, "Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth!" Let us not then account any sin small: let us watch and pray against every deviation from the divine commands: and, from a sense of our own blindness, let us pray to God, "Search thou me, and try me, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."]

4. That every sin we commit is aggravated by the mercies we have received—

[This, as has been observed, was intimated by God in the case of Solomon: and the universal voice of Scripture attests the same. "If our Lord had not come and spoken to the Jews, they had been comparatively without sin:" but his discourses and his miracles rendered them altogether without excuse; insomuch, that "it will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that generation." In like manner we are told, that the superior information of a servant who knows his Lord's will and does it not, will cause him to be beaten with more stripes, than he, whose ignorance forms some kind of plea for his neglect.

What then will be the state of us who have had such ample instruction, and such repeated warnings? If our minds have never been awakened, our misimprovement of the means of grace has involved us in the deepest guilt: but if the Lord has ever "manifested himself to us as he does not unto the world," and we have turned back from following him, our guilt is proportionably increased; so that "it would have been better for us never to have known the way of righteousness, than, having known it, to turn from it."]

CCXXVII.

REVOLT OF THE TEN TRIBES.

1 Kings xii. 24. Middle clause. - - - *This thing is from me.*

IN histories written by men, events are always traced to human efforts and sagacity; but in the inspired history every thing is traced to God. We always find, even in things apparently most contingent, a secret overruling agent, accomplishing his own purposes of mercy or of judgment, and operating with unerring wisdom to the production of his own ends. As "every good and perfect gift" is represented as "coming from above," so the Prophet asks respecting things most calamitous, "Shall there be evil in the city, and the Lord hath not done it[a]?" In the account given us of the revolt of the ten tribes, and their establishment as a separate kingdom under Jeroboam, the proceedings of all the different parties appeared to spring wholly from themselves: but God says of the whole together, "This thing is from me." We will,

I. Confirm this assertion—

We will begin with stating what was "the thing" here referred to—

[After the death of Solomon, the different tribes assembled at Shechem, to acknowledge Rehoboam as his successor to the throne. But previous to their investing him with regal authority, they sought from him a promise that he would lighten their burthens, and redress their grievances. That they had been aggrieved and burthened in some degree, we may easily conceive; because the keeping of seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, together with the building of temples for them all, and maintaining of worship for so many idols, in addition to all the expenses of his own government, must have necessitated Solomon to lay heavy taxes upon his subjects. But still the taxes were not such an intolerable grievance, when it is considered how much wealth Solomon had brought into the kingdom, and what peace and prosperity they had enjoyed during the whole of his reign. Had they complained of the licentiousness and idolatry which Solomon had introduced, and sought the removal of those great abuses, they would have acted well: but it was not about God's honour that they were concerned; they regarded

[a] Am. iii. 6.

regarded nothing but their own interests: and, *like the generality of discontented patriots, they overlooked all the blessings they had enjoyed under his government, and were unreasonably clamorous about the taxes levied for its support.*

Rehoboam took three days to consider of the proposal; and by this delay he at once discovered his unwillingness to comply with their wishes, and gave them time to form and mature a conspiracy against him. He first consulted the old men, who had been his father's counsellors; but, not relishing their sage advice, he consulted his own young companions; who recommended rather a system of intimidation: this was more congenial with his own pride; but it exasperated to the utmost those whom by conciliatory measures he might easily have won[b].

The event was such as might have been foreseen: the ten tribes would no longer acknowledge any allegiance to the house of David, but appointed a king of their own, even Jeroboam, whom they had sent for out of Egypt, to be an head, or centre of union to them, on the present emergency[c]. The contemptuous way in which they spake of David was most ungrateful, seeing that his whole life had been spent in their service[d]: but *past obligations* weigh but little with men irritated by a sense of *present injuries.*

The mode adopted to appease their minds, was no less absurd than the measure by which they had been incensed. Rehoboam sent Adoram, his tax-gatherer, the most obnoxious of all persons, to confer with them: but him they immediately stoned to death[e].

Rehoboam then fled to Jerusalem, and raised a large army of 180,000 men from among the two remaining tribes, to reduce the rebels by force: but God sent a prophet to him, and to the whole army, forbidding them to proceed, and declaring that the whole matter had been ordered by God himself: "Thus saith the Lord, Ye shall not go up nor fight against your brethren, the children of Israel: return every man to his own house; for *this thing is from me.*"]

That *this thing was from God,* we now proceed to shew—

[Hitherto nothing has appeared to be from God, except the sending of a prophet to declare his will respecting the prosecution of the war: but the whole was really of God, in its *rise,* its *progress,* and its *termination.*

From God it took *its rise.* On account of Solomon's transgressions, God declared to Solomon himself that HE *would rend* the ten tribes out of the hand of *his son,* and *give them* to *his servant*[f]. He sent also a prophet to Jeroboam, to announce to him by a very expressive emblem, that ten of the tribes should be

[b] ver. 5—14. [c] ver. 2, 3. [d] ver. 16. [e] ver. 18.
[f] ch. xi. 11—13.

be taken from Solomon on account of his iniquities, and be *given to him*[g]. These matters were well known to all Israel; for Solomon had on this account sought to kill Jeroboam[h]; and constrained him to flee to Egypt for protection: and from thence had the ten tribes sent for him as soon as Solomon was dead. Jeroboam was indeed of an ambitious turn of mind, particularly after he had been raised by Solomon from a low station to a place of great honour and authority[i]; but it was the declaration of God's purpose that called it forth into activity, and directed all the ten tribes to look to him as their future head.

Every step of *its progress* must also be traced to the same source. The complaints of the tribes, and the infatuation of the young monarch, might be supposed to originate wholly with themselves, and to spring entirely from the discontent of the one, and from the other's pride: and it is true, that God did not infuse these evil dispositions into their minds: but it is also true that he suffered these dispositions to rage, and the collision to arise, on purpose that he might accomplish his own purposes by them. This is expressly asserted in the history before us: "The king hearkened not unto the people; *for the cause was from the Lord, that he might perform his saying, which the Lord spake by Ahijah the Shilonite unto Jeroboam the son of Nebat*[k]."

That *its termination* was from him is plainly declared in the words of our text; "*This thing* (from first to last) *is from me*:" and, that it was from him, he shewed, by constraining Rehoboam, and the whole army that he had raised, to acquiesce immediately in the loss they had sustained, and to rest satisfied with having all the other tribes for rivals and enemies, whom hitherto they had had for friends and brethren.

Now this kind of statement is by no means uncommon in the holy Scriptures. God is often represented as overruling both men and devils for the accomplishment of his own purposes. God had determined to deliver the Amorites into the hand of Israel, though he would not deliver into their hand either Moab or Edom. Hence he influenced the minds of both the Moabites and Edomites to supply his people with food for money, that they might be spared; and equally influenced the minds of the Amorites to refuse that succour, that they might be destroyed[l]. In like manner he left king Amaziah to disregard the warnings of the prophet, whom he had sent to remonstrate with him about his idolatries; "because God had determined to destroy him[m]." The agency of evil spirits is also sometimes called in for the same end. In the case of Ahab, a whole host of them were permitted of God to stimulate the false prophets to give such counsel to Ahab as should infallibly terminate in his ruin[n]. In a word, the whole

[g] ib. ver. 26—35. [h] ib. ver. 40. [i] ib. ver. 37. [k] ver. 15.
[l] Deut. ii. 28—30. [m] 2 Chron. xxv. 14—16.
[n] 1 Kin. xxii. 22, 23.

whole conspiracy of Jews and Gentiles against our blessed Lord, under the same infallible direction, accomplished in every particular "what God's hand and his counsel had determined before to be done[o]." The doctrine of our text therefore, though strange at first sight, is no other than what the Scriptures plainly and universally assert.]

Let us then proceed to,

II. Make some reflections upon it—

In contemplating Jehovah as he is represented in this place, we must of necessity observe,

1. How sovereign his power!

[God gave the kingdom to Saul; then rent it from him, and gave it to David and Solomon; then reduced it to two tribes only, in the hands of Rehoboam, giving the other ten to Jeroboam. In all this he acted sovereignly, disposing of it according to the counsel of his own will. And thus he does in all the kingdoms upon earth[p]: "He doth according to his will in the armies of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou[q]?" Nor is this true in reference to kingdoms only: he disposes equally of families and individuals; "He is the judge; he putteth down one, and setteth up another[r]."

How effectually does this consideration cut off all occasion for pride in those who are elevated, and for complaint in those that are debased! for as, on the one hand, "they who have received a gift can never reasonably boast as if they had not received it," so on the other hand, every sufferer must say, "I was still and opened not my mouth, because thou didst it." Seeing then of what practical use this reflection is, let us recur to it on all occasions, for the humbling of our minds in prosperity, and the quieting of them in adversity.]

2. How mysterious his influence!

[In all the circumstances before mentioned, the different persons acted freely; and yet, as we have seen, were overruled by God in every step they took. How incomprehensible is this to our finite understandings! We know not how spirit acts upon matter; how then can we expect to know in what manner the Spirit of God acts upon our spirits! Yet if we know from experience that our own spirit does assuredly act upon our material body, we may be equally assured, upon the testimony of God, that there is a spiritual influence exercised by him upon the minds of his people. There is indeed a considerable difference between the mode in which that is exercised towards the godly, and the ungodly: in influencing the ungodly, he merely gives scope for the

[o] Acts iv. 27, 28. [p] Dan. ii. 21. [q] Dan. iv. 17, 35. [r] Ps. lxxv. 7.

the exercise of dispositions which already exist in their own minds; but, in influencing the godly, he first infuses holy dispositions into their minds, and then calls forth those dispositions into exercise by the operation of his own grace, exciting and strengthening the soul for the duties to which it is called.

Do we not then see, that God only is to be feared? that, if we secure his favour, not all the universe can hurt us? Let a Laban, or an Esau, come forth against us, God can restrain his rage[s], and make "the wrath of man to praise him:" or let an enraged army determine to destroy us, he can by a single word assuage their malice, and avert the storm. "The hearts of kings are in his hand as the rivers of water, and he turneth them whithersoever he will[t]." "If therefore God be for us, we may be sure that none can be against us."]

3. How sure his word!

[In the instance before us it was fulfilled, notwithstanding all the parties strove to counteract it. The ten tribes would have submitted to Rehoboam's yoke, if only he had spoken kindly to them at first: they had no design in the first instance to separate from him. The advice of the young men was given with a view to keep the people in subjection by fear: and the determination of the army was to reduce them by force. Thus all endeavoured to preserve the kingdom entire; yet all were accessary to the division of it. Thus shall every word of God be fulfilled in its season. If that did not fail which depended, so to speak, on the voluntary actions of men, much less shall that which shall be executed by God alone. He has told us that "the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of heaven;" but that "the wicked shall be turned into hell, with all the people that forget God:" and shall either of those declarations fall to the ground? No; not a jot or tittle of them shall ever fail. O that we may be wise, and learn to "tremble at the word of God," whilst yet we may escape his threatenings, and secure the possession of his promised inheritance!]

[s] Gen. xxxi. 29. & xxxiii. 1, 4.

[t] Prov. xxi. 1. If this were a subject for the Fifth of November, it might here be shewn in what a mysterious way God preserved our nation from the plot that had been formed for its destruction.

CCXXVIII.

JEROBOAM'S IDOLATRY REPROVED.

1 Kin. xiii. 4. *And it came to pass, when king Jeroboam heard the saying of the man of God, which had cried against the altar in Beth-el, that he put forth his hand from the altar, saying, Lay hold on him. And his hand which he put forth against him dried up, so that he could not pull it in again to him.*

TO be raised to a situation of eminence and authority is generally thought a subject of congratulation:

but if preferment be not accompanied with a proportionable increase of grace to fit us for it, it is rather to be dreaded than desired. Distinctions of every kind open a wider sphere for the exercise of our own corruptions, and too frequently become to the possessors of them an occasion of deeper condemnation. This is strongly illustrated in the case of Pharaoh, who was raised up to the throne of Egypt on purpose that he might have an opportunity of shewing all that was in his heart, and that God's power might be displayed and magnified in his destruction[a]. In like manner Jeroboam was raised to the throne of Israel, not, alas! for any benefit either to himself or others, but for the ultimate augmentation of his own guilt and misery. Whilst in a humble situation, he was industrious, and trust-worthy[b]: but when he was preferred to a higher post, he became ambitious[c], turbulent, rebellious[d]: and when he was placed on the throne of Israel, he drew away that whole people to idolatry; and has from that hour been never mentioned but with abhorrence, as the man "that caused Israel to sin." In considering the account here given of him, we shall notice,

I. His unbelieving expedient—

Scarcely was Jeroboam raised to the throne, before he established idolatry throughout his dominions—

[Wishing to make the breach between Israel and Judah irreparable, he determined to cut off all intercourse between them; and to establish a worship of his own devising, that the people might not go up any longer to worship at Jerusalem. He knew that it would be in vain to prohibit religion altogether; but that to establish a false religion would be comparatively easy; since, if men have something wherewith to satisfy their own minds, they are not very scrupulous about inquiring what is agreeable to the mind of God. Having recently come out of Egypt, he introduced the idols that were there worshipped, even golden calves; and set them up in Dan, and Beth-el. One would have supposed that such an innovation would have shaken his throne to its foundation; but it seems to have created no uneasiness at all, nor to have produced one single remonstrance throughout the land. Do we not in this behold a true picture of human-

[a] Rom. ix. 17. [b] Ch. x. 28. [c] ib. ver. 37.
[d] 2 Chron. xiii. 6.

human-nature in every age and place? The worst of men must have some forms, by the observance of which they may satisfy their own consciences: but the easier and cheaper their religion is, the more suited it will be to their taste. To be told *they need not comply with the self-denying commands of God*[e], will be agreeable to their corrupt hearts: "Master, spare thyself," is to them a gratifying advice; and, wherever the Gospel is faithfully administered, the effect of this advice is clearly seen: the express commands of God oppose, in many instances, but a feeble barrier to the solicitations of carnal ease — — —]

To this he was instigated by unbelief—

[He was afraid lest his subjects, by going up to Jerusalem at the stated feasts, should be drawn away from him, and be induced to return to their former prince. Nor were these fears altogether groundless. The very exercises of religion would tend to convince them that they had sinned in casting off the yoke of Rehoboam; and the familiar intercourse which they would have with the other two tribes, would tend to reconcile their minds to the idea of being again united with them under one head. But Jeroboam was bound not to listen to any such considerations as these, because he had the express promise of God, that "his house should be built up, like the house of David[f]," provided he would walk in the path of duty. This was a sufficient security to him, that the evil which he dreaded should never happen, whilst he remained faithful to his God. In God therefore he should have put his trust. But he gave way to unbelief, and sought for that in the violation of God's commands, which was only to be obtained in the observance of them; yea, he madly sought the establishment of his throne by the commission of those very crimes which had subverted the throne of Solomon. This is a weakness to which even the best of men have yielded on some occasions: the great father of the faithful himself repeatedly denied his wife through fear, as Isaac also did; and Jacob gained by deceit and falsehood the blessing, which he could not wait to receive in God's own time and way. But such unbelief, even in the smallest instances, is most sinful; and, in the instance before us, it brought the curse of God upon that whole people. Let us therefore guard against its influence on our hearts; for its suggestions are always evil, and its effects are uniformly destructive — — —]

His conduct, when reproved for this device, leads us to consider,

II. His vindictive wrath—

A prophet was sent from Judah to reprove him—

[God had decreed that the utmost indignity should be offered to

[e] Ch. xii. 28. [f] Ch. xi. 38.

to the altar at Beth-el, where Jeroboam was now officiating in his own person. He had appointed the priests, and sacrifices, together with the sacred feasts, without any reference to the divine commands, having "devised them of his own heart:" and now he was warned before all the people, that the very priests who offered their sacrifices upon it, should have their own bones burnt upon it by a prince of the house of David, whose name was Josiah. Now it is remarkable that no king of the house of David had a son named Josiah, for the space of three hundred years; and that then it was a wicked king who so named his son: so far was *man* from making any attempt to fulfil this prophecy. But God had ordained that such an one should in due time arise; and that he should execute what was now foretold: and, as a certain pledge of its ultimate accomplishment, the altar was miraculously rent in the very presence of Jeroboam, and "the ashes that were upon it were poured out[g]." This was humiliating to Jeroboam, not only on account of the indignity that should be offered to his altar, but because its being offered by one of the house of David was a pledge, that Judah should regain the ascendant, and thereby be enabled to execute the threatened judgments.]

This, instead of humbling him, incensed him in the highest degree—

[Instantly "he stretched out his hand to lay hold" on the prophet, determining probably to put him to death. Thus it is that the carnal heart is ever ready to rise against God. Men will insult God by every means in their power; yet, if reproved for it by a servant of the Most High, they account it an indignity, to be expiated only by the life of the offender. This was strongly exemplified in Jeremiah, and John the Baptist[h]: and indeed in every company we go into, we see the hand stretched out by wicked men against every one that dares to advocate the cause of God — — — Not that the servants of God are on this account to refrain from bearing their testimony against iniquity: they must do so wherever they are, without fearing the face of man, or regarding any consequences that may come upon them.]

This rage of his brought on him, what we are next to consider,

III. His exemplary punishment—

God instantly smote his arm, so that he could not pull it in again to him—

[On many occasions has God vindicated the cause of his afflicted people, and shewn himself the avenger of their wrongs. Ahab menaced Micaiah; but God cut him off, according to Micaiah's word. Pashur smote Jeremiah, and put him in the stocks; but God

[g] ver. 3, 5. [h] Jer. xxvi. 7, 8, 11. Matt. xiv. 3—5, 10.

God "soon made him a terror to himself[1]." In truth, God regards every thing that is done against his people as done to himself. When Paul was persecuting the saints, the language of Jesus to him was, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou ME?" We do not indeed expect that God will often interpose in the visible manner that he did in the instance before us; but he will record every thing in the book of his remembrance, and requite every man according to his works. Then shall it be seen, that, however contemptible the saints may now appear, "it were better for a man to have a mill-stone hanged about his neck and be cast into the depths of the sea, than that he should offend one of those little ones who believe in Christ." "He that toucheth you," says God, "toucheth the apple of mine eye."]

Now was this proud persecutor constrained to ask for the prayers of him, whom he had just before endeavoured to destroy—

[Thus was Pharaoh reduced to seek the intercession of Moses: and thus are many amongst ourselves compelled in a season of adversity to desire the prayers of those very Ministers, whom in time of prosperity they have reviled and persecuted. And happy will it be for those who find their error *now*, and have grace given them to repent of it: for assuredly they who will not humble themselves in this world, will be made monuments of God's wrath to all eternity.]

IMPROVEMENT—

1. Let nothing ever induce us to sin against God—

The hope of preserving his temporal interests led Jeroboam into all his sins: and similar hopes are apt to produce the like baneful influence on us. But, supposing we should succeed, what can repay us for the loss of the Divine favour? To adhere with stedfastness to the path of duty is our truest wisdom. Whilst faithfully serving God, we may safely leave events in his hands. If we suffer for well-doing, we may console ourselves with this reflection, that to lose by virtue is infinitely better than to gain by sin. Our losses will be soon made up in the eternal world; but our gains will terminate in everlasting woe.]

2. If we have sinned at any time, let us be thankful for reproof—

[How thankful should Jeroboam have been to the prophet, who at the peril of his life declared the unalterable purpose of his God! So should all be who are reproved for sin. It is no pleasing task to denounce the judgments of God against sin or sinners: but it is necessary: and it is at the peril of his own soul, if the watchman forget to warn the citizens of their approaching

[1] Jer. xx. 2—4.

approaching danger. A necessity is laid upon God's Ministers; and woe be to them, if they neglect their duty! Let reproof then be ever welcome to you; and let all watch over each other with tender love, and inflexible fidelity.]

CCXXIX.

THE DISOBEDIENT PROPHET SLAIN.

1 Kings xiii. 26. *And when the prophet that brought him back from the way heard thereof, he said, It is the man of God who was disobedient unto the word of the Lord; therefore the Lord hath delivered him unto the lion, which hath torn him, and slain him, according to the word of the Lord, which he spake unto him.*

IT not unfrequently happens, that they who are enabled to maintain their stedfastness in more arduous circumstances, are surprised and overcome in situations of less difficulty. Noah and Lot, whilst living in the midst of ungodly men, were circumspect and exemplary in the highest degree; but when freed from those restraints, and enjoying repose in the bosom of their families, they fell, and greatly dishonoured their profession. The case of the disobedient prophet was not indeed to be compared with theirs in point of enormity: but, in withstanding greater temptations, and falling when his victory appeared complete, he exhibits another instance of human instability. Much indeed is to be said for him, because he was deceived: but his history affords a solemn warning unto all. In illustration of it we shall consider,

I. The character of the seducer—

Many have thought him to be a pious man: and certainly there are many features in his character which have a favourable aspect. He is called "an old prophet," which intimates that God had made use of him in revealing his will to men. He expressed a very high regard for the prophet that came out of Egypt, and, with considerable trouble to himself, sought to enjoy communion with him. Beyond a doubt he was at that time inspired of God, because he

he confirmed with divine authority the prediction that had been delivered, respecting the burning of men's bones on Jeroboam's altar; an event that did did not take place till after the expiration of three hundred years. When he heard that the prophet whom he had deceived was dead, he went boldly, and as it were, in faith, up to the very face of the lion, and took away from him the corpse, and returned with it to his own house. For the loss of so good a man he greatly mourned; and he determined to honour him to the utmost of his power. He interred his body in his own tomb; he wrote an inscription over it to commemorate his fidelity, and to record the prophecy he had delivered; (which, considering the offence it might give to Jeroboam, was no small instance of holy zeal:) and finally, he desired that his bones might be laid by the side of that pious man, to intimate, that he desired to have his portion with him at the resurrection of the just.

As to the deceit practised by him to obtain the society of that godly man, it may be said, that, though wrong in itself, it proceeded from love, and was a kind of pious fraud, for the obtaining of a privilege he could not otherwise enjoy.

But after all, if we candidly consider the other parts of his character, we cannot but pronounce him a wicked man. For,

1. He forbore to testify against the sin of others—

[That he was a prophet, there is no doubt, even as Balaam had been before him. But to what purpose was he endued with a spirit of prophecy, if not to exert himself in reproving sin, and in maintaining the cause of God in the world? Was that a time to be silent, when idolatry was establishing throughout the land, and God himself was set aside as no longer worthy of men's regard? When God had set him there as a light, was he to put his light under a bushel? Should he not rather have "raised his voice on high, and shewn the house of Israel their transgressions?" Yet, behold, no testimony did he bear against the reigning abominations: he was "a dumb dog that could not bark, sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber[a]." Methinks, if God had even enjoined him to be silent, (as on some occasions he has

[a] Isai. lvi. 10, 11.

has done[b],) his experience should have accorded with that of Jeremiah, who tells us, that "God's word was in his heart as a burning fire shut up in his bones, insomuch that he was weary with forbearing, and could not stay[c]." But no such feelings had he: he was content to let all go on their own way, provided he might but enjoy his ease: and therefore he was no better than an idol shepherd, against whom are denounced the heaviest woes[d]. The watchman that omits to give warning of the approaching enemy, and the shepherd that careth not for his flock, are among the most faulty of characters, and the most injurious of mankind[e] — — —]

2. He countenanced sin in his own children—

[Every parent is bound to "bring up his children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord:" and every good man can have that testimony from God which Abraham had, "I know him, that he will command his children, and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord[f]." But how did this prophet act? Did he restrain his sons? Did he insist that they should "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them[g]?" No: when they had attended the idolatrous service, they came home and told every thing to their father, assured that they should meet with no rebuke from him, nor receive at his hands any testimony of his displeasure. What pretensions then could he have to piety? Eli had reproved the impieties of his sons; yet, because he had not authoritatively interposed to prevent or punish their abominations, God visited him with a very signal judgment. How reprehensible then must this prophet have been, who both connived at, and consented to, a crime, for which he was bound by the law to put even his own children to death[h]! Let parents know, that if, by neglecting to "provide for their own household they deny the faith and become worse than infidels," much more must they incur the heaviest guilt by neglecting to provide for their eternal interests — — —]

3. He even tempted another to the commission of sin—.

[Here his conduct was most wanton and cruel. He knew how stedfastly the man of God had resisted every temptation, and had withstood every inducement either of hope or fear; and behold, he calls falsehood to his aid, and pretends to a divine commission, in order that he may prevail to divert the holy man from his purpose, and to involve him in sin. Nor do we find that, when he was inspired to denounce the judgments of God against

[b] Ezek. iii. 26. [c] Jer. xx. 9. [d] Zech. xi. 17.
[e] Ezek. xxxiii. 1—9. & xxxiv. 1—10. [f] Gen. xviii. 19.
[g] Eph. v. 11. [h] Deut. xiii. 6—9.

against him for his transgression, he ever humbled himself, or implored pardon for his offence: methinks, the least he could have done would[o] have been to intercede with God, as David did for his suffering people, "Let thy hand, I pray thee, be against me, and against my father's house, and not against this poor man whom I have deceived[i]:" but he felt no such compunction, notwithstanding the enormity of his offence. Unhappy he, who was thus led to offend! but unhappier far that wicked man, who cast the stumbling-block before him[k]! He probably thought it but a light matter to deceive a person in so small a point as this: but, if to tempt a Nazarite with wine was no light sin[l], neither could this be light, "where the guilt of falsehood and blasphemy was superadded to that of causing his brother to offend."]

The success of the seducer leads us next to contemplate,

II. The fate of the seduced—

There our proud hearts are almost ready to sit in judgment upon God. But "his ways are in the deep;" "neither giveth he account of any of his matters:" and whether we discern the equity of his dispensations or not, it becomes us to silence every murmuring thought with this, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" Certainly we cannot but compassionate the fate of the unhappy man, when we see him falling a victim to the divine displeasure: nevertheless we derive from it much important instruction. The judgment inflicted on him shews us,

1. That no command of God is to be trifled with—

[The command not to eat bread or drink water in that place might appear small; but, however small in itself, it was sanctioned by the same authority as the greatest. That there are degrees of importance in a moral view between one command and another, is certain: but as bearing the stamp of divine authority, all are alike, and to be regarded by us with equal reverence[m]. Our Lord informs us, that "whoso shall break one of the least of his commandments, and teach men so, shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven[n]," or, as that expression seems to import, be the farthest from it. Accordingly we find in Scripture very heavy judgments inflicted for, what might be considered, very small offences: the man who gathered sticks upon the

[i] 2 Sam. xxiv. 17. [k] Matt. xviii. 7. [l] Am. ii. 12.
[m] Jam. ii. 11. [n] Matt. v. 19.

the sabbath-day was stoned to death by God's express command: and Uzzah, who stretched forth his hand to support the tottering ark, was "struck dead for his error." Let us therefore not presume to violate any commandment under the idea of its being but a small command, or a venial offence: for we behold in the instance before us, that God is "a jealous God," and will vindicate the honour of his insulted law.]

2. That the more nearly we are related to God, the more aggravated is every sin that we commit against him—

[It might have been hoped, that so small a sin, committed so inadvertently, by one who was actively engaged in God's service, might have passed unnoticed: but, on the contrary, he was punished, whilst the idolatry of Jeroboam, and the impiety of the old prophet, were overlooked. But God has taught us that "judgment shall begin at the house of God[o];" and that the more distinguished we have been by his unmerited favours, the more certainly shall our transgressions be visited upon us[p]. Of this we have a most remarkable instance in the case of Moses, who for one inadvertent word was excluded from the land of Canaan; nor could any intreaties of Moses get the sentence reversed. Let us not then presume upon our relation to God, or upon the mercies we have received from him, but rather be the more fearful of offending him, in proportion to the kindness he has exercised towards us.]

3. That there is a time coming, when the present inequalities of the divine dispensations shall be rectified—

[The sight of such lenity exercised towards the two great offenders, and such apparent severity towards this holy man, naturally leads our minds forward to a day of future retribution, when rewards and punishments shall be dispensed with impartial justice and unerring wisdom. At present, the saints are "chastened; but it is that they may not be condemned with the world:" whereas the ungodly are in many instances unpunished; but "are reserved unto the day of judgment to be punished;" being left in the mean time to fill up the measure of their iniquities, and to "treasure up wrath against the day of wrath." Whatever therefore may now appear inexplicable to us, let us wait to have it cleared up at that day, when the whole assembled universe shall confess, "True and righteous are thy judgments, Lord God Almighty[q]."]

From this subject we will take occasion to suggest some useful ADVICE—

1. Guard

[o] Ezek. ix. 6. [p] Am. iii. 2. [q] Rev. xvi. 7.

1. Guard against conforming to the world—

[This holy prophet was forbidden to eat bread or drink water in that idolatrous land, or even to return by the way that he came into it: and this was to shew the people that he would not have the smallest communion with them, or any acquaintance with their ways. The same *precise conduct* is not enjoined to us, nor indeed would it be practicable; for then, as the Apostle says, "we must needs go out of the world." But the *spirit of* that conduct must be found in us: we must "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds." We are commanded to "come out of the world, and be separate, and not to touch the unclean thing:" and the reason of this injunction is assigned to us, namely, that "the believer can no more have communion with the unbeliever than light with darkness, or Christ with Belial." And our Lord constantly characterizes his followers in this way, "They are not of the world, *even as I am not of the world.*" Let us remember then, that we are merely sent here for a little time to fulfil the particular duties assigned us, and that our home and our rest are in a better world.]

2. Be careful whom you select for your acquaintance—

[As we are not to select our friends from among the openly profane, so must we be careful whom we confide in even among the religious world. It is not every person that makes a profession of religion who will make a profitable companion. There are many who "have a name to live, and yet are dead;" and many "profess that they know God, but in works deny him." St. John cautions us well on this head: "Brethren, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits, whether they are of God; for many false prophets are gone out into the world[r]." Had the good prophet inquired into the character of the old prophet, instead of giving implicit credit to his professions, he would not have fallen. And it is a melancholy fact, that multitudes of simple-hearted and godly Christians are essentially injured by their hypocritical associates[s]. We would earnestly advise therefore all young Christians to be on their guard, and to take those only for their confidential friends, whose lives they have found to correspond with their professions.]

3. Let the word of God be the only rule of your conduct—

[The man of God had not the same evidence for the reversal of the command, that he had for the command itself: he was wrong therefore in giving such implicit credit to a stranger, whatever his character or professions might be. And is it not wrong in us to suffer the assertions of men, whatever their

[r] 1 John iv. 1. [s] Rom. xvi. 18.

their general character may be, to supersede the express declarations of God himself? Who amongst us has not heard a thousand times from human authority, that God does not command this or that; and that such strictness is not required of us? But we have an infallible standard by which we should try every sentiment that is proposed to us: "To the law, and to the testimony: if men speak not according to this word, there is no light in them." Having "the sure testimony of God, we shall do well to take heed to it," with jealous vigilance, undeviating constancy, and unabated firmness.]

CCXXX.

ABIJAH'S PIETY REWARDED.

1 Kin. xiv. 13. *He only of Jeroboam shall come to the grave, because in him there is found some good thing toward the Lord God of Israel in the house of Jeroboam.*

MEN most addicted to wickedness, or most confident in their avowal of infidelity, no sooner come into circumstances of great affliction, than they feel the weakness of their principles, and their need of other supports than any they have yet experienced. In such seasons they secretly begin to see the value of that faith and piety, which they have been wont to deride. No man ever appeared more confident in his iniquities than Jeroboam; yet, when he was in deep affliction on account of the dangerous illness of his son Abijah, to whom did he go? to his idols? No; he knew that "an idol was nothing in the world." Did he send for those whom he had constituted his priests? No; he expected no good whatever from them. But there was in the land a prophet of the Lord, even that very prophet, who, many years before, had been sent to declare to him his destined elevation to the throne of Israel. To him he sends in his affliction, even to him whom hitherto he had neglected and despised. But, ashamed to have his sentiments known, he will not go himself; nor will he send a servant, lest he should be betrayed: he therefore sends his wife, who, on the one hand, was as deeply concerned as himself about the issue of his son's illness; and, on the other hand,

hand, was equally concerned to preserve an appearance of consistency in his conduct: her therefore he sends in disguise, that he may at once obtain the information he desires, and prevent the discovery which he fears. Unhappy and foolish man! What favour could he expect from God, when he was seeking him in such a way; when he did not even ask for any spiritual blessing, or desire to be instructed how to obtain one, but sought merely relief from a state of painful suspense? The answer was such as he might well expect; namely, that his unparalleled iniquities should be visited on him, and on his whole family. Respecting the son about whom he was so anxious, there was some exception: all the rest should die unlamented, and be devoured by birds and beasts; but *he* should come to the grave, because there was in him some good thing towards the Lord God of Israel.

We propose, in considering what is here said of young Abijah, to notice,

I. His commendation—

This appears at first sight exceeding low: and so indeed it is, if compared with a more advanced state of religion, even as an infant appears scarcely worthy of consideration, when compared with a person of mature age: but if compared, as it ought to be, with a state of spiritual death, it is really great, and worthy, if we may so speak, of the notice taken of it. Consider it,

1. As it was in itself—

[The state of a natural man is that of "enmity against God[a]." Now though the state of Abijah was the lowest that could consist with real piety, yet was it worthy of commendation when compared with that. There was certainly in Abijah a disapprobation of the reigning idolatry: there was also a sincere desire after God's favour, and a secret purpose, if ever it should be in his power, to check the prevailing abominations. Less than this could not consist with sincerity of heart: and more than this does not appear to have manifested itself in him. But this involved in it a change of heart: this was a fruit of divine grace, and formed the first lineaments of the divine image on the soul: and hence it was that God so noticed and approved it.]

2. As

[a] Rom. viii. 7.

2. As existing under his peculiar circumstances—

[He was *a young man*, and at a time of life when contrary dispositions most generally prevail. This therefore rendered it the more pleasing to God, who, as the Father of his whole family, loves "the new-born babes" as truly, if not as ardently, as those, who have attained to riper years. Besides, he was a youth *of high distinction*, the son of a king. Now, though "God is no respecter of persons," but loves the poor as well as the rich, yet, inasmuch as the maintenance of holy principles is far more difficult in high life than it is in a humbler sphere, he approves most eminently that, which exerts itself under circumstances of greatest difficulty. Above all, he cultivated holy principles in a family and a nation sunk in all manner of iniquity. Now to withstand such a torrent, and to exhibit even the feeblest light in a place of such gross darkness, was a most honourable distinction; and it rendered him, who in another situation would have been undeserving of notice, a proper object of God's approbation.

In this view his character is peculiarly deserving the attention of the young, and especially of those in the higher circles of life, and in places where impiety abounds: and happy will they be who have grace to seek such a distinction as his, and courage to maintain it———]

Small as his stature was in grace, he, even in this world, met with,

II. His reward—

The reward bestowed on him seems, like his attainments, of little value; for, as the body is insensible after death, and the soul is unconscious either of the honours that may be paid to the mortal frame, or the indignities it may suffer, it seems to signify very little, whether our body be committed to the grave, or be devoured by beasts. But there is in all of us a desire to have the customary respect paid to our body, after the departure of the soul from it: and, if we knew beforehand that after death it should be treated with all manner of indignities, we should feel life itself considerably embittered to us: we may therefore regard the distinction conferred on young Abijah, as of great value; more especially as it was intended to express the divine approbation of him, in opposition to the displeasure exercised towards his offending family. In this, at all events, it was of great use, in that it served to shew,

1. That

1. That God loveth piety wherever he beholds it—

[God himself is not only holy, but "The Holy One;" and wherever he beholds his own image, he delights in it. There is not a grace without some appropriate expression of God's high regard for it. The poor, the meek, the contrite have all their peculiar promises, and are represented as possessing "ornaments, which in the sight of God are of great price" ——— and such is the estimation in which he beholds these dispositions, that he looks with peculiar complacency upon every person in whom they are found; nor can all the glorious angels around his throne divert his attention from them; yea rather, the angels themselves participate the pleasure, and derive new joys, even in the very presence of their God, from such a sight[b].]

2. That he will reward it, wherever it is found in the lowest degree—

[When God himself asks, "Who hath despised the day of small things[c]?" we may be sure that he himself does not. The smallest gift to a person for his sake, even "a cup of cold water, shall not lose its reward." In like manner the silent thoughts of the heart are noticed by him with a view to their ultimate reward. The prophet tells us that not only they who spoke one to another, but they also "who thought upon his name," had their thoughts recorded in the "book of his remembrance, and were to be his, in the day that he should count up his jewels[d]." Nor can we doubt but that David's desire to build the temple was as much accepted of God, and as liberally rewarded also, as was the actual raising of the edifice by Solomon.]

ADDRESS—

1. Those in whom there is no good thing towards the Lord God of Israel—

[Jeroboam's family bore the name of Israelites, as we do of Christians; yet was there only one among them that had *any* good thing in them. And is not this the state of many individuals at least, if not of families, amongst us? How many are there who feel no concern about the iniquities of the land, no desire after God in their own souls, and no purpose ever to exert themselves in his sacred cause! ——— What then can such persons expect at the hands of God? What, but to be made monuments of his heavy displeasure? O that we would consider what his Prophets and Apostles have spoken respecting such characters, and that we would seek for mercy ere it be too late!]

2. Those in whom it is doubtful whether there be any good thing in them or not—

[There frequently are found some transient motions in the heart,

[b] Isai. lxvi. 2. Luke xv. 10. [c] Zech. iv. 10. [d] Mal. iii. 16, 17.

heart, like those in the stony-ground hearers, which yet are not regarded by God as good, because they have no solid principle as their foundation. But from hence arises a considerable difficulty in judging of our real state: our self-love is apt to flatter and deceive us. But let us remember that God "searcheth the heart and trieth the reins:" he "discerneth the thoughts and intents of the heart:" yea, he "weigheth the spirits," and that too with such exactness as enables him to ascertain with infallible certainty whether there be in them the smallest measure of solid good. Let us fear lest we deceive our own souls, and lest, after all our favourable appearances, "our religion at last be found vain[e]." It is "by the fruits alone that the tree can be known," and that we can ascertain with comfort to ourselves, that "the root of the matter is found in us[f]."]

3. Those in whom there is evidently some good thing—

[Rejoice, and give glory to "God, who hath begun a good work in you." But do not rest satisfied with any attainments. Have you reason to hope that you are "as new-born babes?" then "desire the sincere milk of the word that ye may grow thereby." Whereinsoever you have hitherto done well, seek to "abound more and more:" and let it be your daily endeavour so to "grow up into Christ in all things as your living Head," that you may "come to a perfect man," even to "the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."]

[e] Jam. i. 26. [f] Job xix. 28.

CCXXXI.

ELIJAH AND THE WIDOW OF SAREPTA.

1 Kin. xvii. 15, 16. *And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days. And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord, which he spake by Elijah.*

MUCH as temporal calamities are to be dreaded and deprecated, there are occasions whereon a pious man may desire, and even pray for, the infliction of them upon his fellow-creatures. As St. Paul "delivered an offender unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus," so we may wish for some divine interposition to arrest sinners in their course, and to bring

bring them to a sense of their guilt and danger. It was in this view that Elijah prayed for a famine that should correct and reclaim the whole nation of Israel: and, when he had obtained from God an assurance that the judgment should be inflicted upon them, and never be reversed but in answer to his prayers, he boldly warned Ahab of the impending calamity, advertising him for what end it would be sent, and how it was to be improved for the nation's good[a]. As for himself, in obedience to the Divine direction, he retired to the brook Cherith, and was for a long time supported there by ravens, which brought him bread and meat regularly twice a day: and, when that brook was dried up, he went to Zarephath, or Sarepta, which belonged to Sidon, and was there nourished by a widow woman, whom God had appointed to sustain him. Thus, whilst the iniquities of the nation were severely punished, the care which God takes of his obedient servants was the more signally manifested.

The account given us of his abode with the Sidonian widow is very interesting, inasmuch as it displays the unbounded goodness of God to her in return for her kindness towards his faithful servant. Let us consider,

I. Her work—

Elijah going, as he was commanded, to the city of Zarephath, found the widow gathering a few sticks for the purpose of dressing the last remnant of provision that remained to her for herself and her son: and after soliciting a draught of water, he requested her to give him a morsel of bread. This led to a disclosure of the circumstances in which she was: but he assured her, that she need not fear; for that God would so multiply her little store, that it should never be exhausted till after the famine should have ceased. On this occasion we behold,

1. The extent of her liberality—

[Having

[a] Compare ver. 1. with Jam. v. 17, 18.

[Having but a sufficiency for a single meal for herself and her son, and having no prospect whatever of obtaining from man any further supply, she imparted to this stranger a portion of her provision, and dressed it with her own hands on purpose for him. Perhaps since the foundation of the world there never was so striking an illustration of the character given many centuries afterwards to the Macedonian churches; of whom it is said, that, "in a great trial of affliction, their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality[b]." We admire, and justly too, the astonishing liberality of the widow in the Gospel, who, possessing only two mites, cast them both into the treasury: but great as that was, it by no means equalled that which is recorded in our text: for the widow who gave her two mites, had herself only to support; whereas the other widow had a son also: and, though the widow with her two mites knew not where to obtain more, yet there was no general pressure at that time and place; so that her neighbours, if willing, were able to supply her wants; whereas the other widow was surrounded by those only who were involved in the same calamity with herself; and consequently could hope for no relief whatever; since however her neighbours might have the inclination, they had not the ability to relieve her. Well therefore may this act of the Zidonian widow be "published, (as that of the Jewish widow is,) through the whole world, as a memorial of her."]

2. The strength of her faith—

[Though a Gentile woman, she may well be called a daughter of Abraham; for she very closely walked in the steps of Abraham[c]. The declaration made to her as from God was made by a perfect stranger, and was unsupported by any miracle; yet was it made the ground of action by her without a moment's hesitation: we may say of her therefore, as of Abraham, "She staggered not at the promises of God through unbelief, but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded, that what He had promised he was able also to perform[d]."]

Let us now contemplate,

II. Her reward—

Richly was she repaid for this act of faith and love—

["Her barrel of meal wasted not, nor did her cruse of oil fail," for the space of two years, during which time the Prophet and herself and family were supported by them. We behold in the common course of providence, seed producing "thirty, sixty, and even an hundred-fold:" but never was there seen, either before or since, such an harvest as this. But truly, if "God is known by the judgments that he executeth," so is he also by the

[b] 2 Cor. viii. 2. [c] Rom. iv. 12. [d] ib. ver. 20, 21.

the gifts that he bestoweth. He has said, that "what we give to the poor, we lend unto the Lord; and that whatsoever we lay out, he will repay as again:" but, in the instance before us, "the handful of corn sprang up as the woods of Lebanon."]

This fitly represents what shall be done in the eternal world—

[There will be a proportion between the works of men and their reward, so far, that the more we have done for the Lord the more we shall receive from him, reaping sparingly or bountifully according as we have sown[e]. But what proportion exists between any work of ours, and the lowest reward that can be conferred in heaven? Surely none: a whole life spent in the service of God is nothing when compared with an eternity of bliss. We need not however doubt on this account the certainty of God's promises; but rather may enlarge our expectations to the utmost extent of them, assured, that in the accomplishment of them our most sanguine hopes shall be more than realized.

But let us never forget what it is that God has promised to reward; it is *the obedience of faith*. Had the widow bargained, as it were, to receive a recompence for her provisions, she never could have hoped for such a return as she received: but when she gave freely for the Lord's sake, and cast herself wholly upon him, then God esteemed nothing too great to confer upon her. So, if we would purchase heaven by our works, we shall in vain look for such blessedness: but if in a way of holy self-denial we will consecrate all that we are and have unto the Lord, for the exalting of his name, then will God load us with his richest benefits both in time and in eternity.

Let not any one say, "This mercy may be shewn to others, but not to *me*:" for God is sovereign in the distribution of his gifts; and, if he has already given us a desire to serve him, he will infallibly recompense our services in a better world. The widow of Sarepta was a Gentile: yet, as our Lord told the Jews, was Elijah sent to her, whilst all the widows that were in Israel were passed by[f]. In like manner may God send his blessings to *us*, however far we are off from him; yea he may send them to us in preference to those who appear more likely to obtain them. This to a proud Pharisee is an offensive truth[g]: but to a humble penitent it is replete with comfort. Let us only attend to his word, and it shall be well with us: "Believe in the Lord, so shall ye be established; believe his Prophets, so shall ye prosper[h]."]

[e] 2 Cor. ix. 6. [f] Luke iv. 25, 26. [g] ib. ver. 28, 29.
[h] 2 Chron. xx. 20.

CCXXXII.

THE WIDOW'S SON RAISED BY ELIJAH.

1 Kin. xvii. 22, 23. *And the Lord heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived. And Elijah took the child, and brought him down out of the chamber into the house, and delivered him unto his mother: and Elijah said, See, thy Son liveth!*

THOUGH God was pleased to separate for himself a peculiar people, to whom alone he communicated the knowledge of his will, he gave frequent intimations to them, that his mercy should in due time be extended unto the Gentiles also. The history of the Sidonian widow was particularly noticed in that view by our Lord himself. In his first sermon at Nazareth, he warned the Jews, that they must not rest in their outward privileges, since, if they walked unworthy of them, God would again, as he had frequently done before, transfer to the Gentiles those blessings to which they foolishly supposed themselves exclusively entitled[a]. The peculiar mercy referred to by him is that which we have already considered, the feeding of her by miracle during the years of famine, whilst no such mercy was vouchsafed to any widow in Israel. But in our text we are informed of another mercy which she received, and which was the first of the kind that was ever vouchsafed to any child of man, namely, the restoring of her son to life. In bringing this part of her history before you, we shall distinctly notice,

I. Her trouble—

She had lost her son, her only son. This was a very heavy affliction to her: it would be so to any parent; but it was more especially so to her, because she had previously been reduced to widowhood, and therefore had none to be the support and comfort of her declining years. In him all her affections were centered, and with him all her hopes were destroyed. But the affliction was the heavier, because,

1. It

[a] Luke iv. 25—27.

1. It was unexpected—

[Two years before, when she thought her child near to death, she spoke of it with the most perfect composure[b]: but now her distress and sorrow were exceeding great: on the former occasion she saw her little provision gradually consuming, and death advancing with rapid strides; and therefore her mind was prepared for the event: but here the event was so sudden that she had not time even to go to the Prophet, and desire his intercessions in her behalf: hence the stroke was almost insupportable; and made her even reflect upon the Prophet, as though he had occasioned her calamity.]

2. It was singular—

[Had the calamity been general, she had found some consolation in the thought that she suffered nothing but what was common to those around her. We doubt not but that this consideration rendered the famine more supportable to each individual than it would have been if the calamity had been peculiar to himself. In like manner, if she had found many other widows despoiled of their children like herself, her sympathy with others would have lessened her grief on her own account. But no such consolatory thought was left for her: she seemed to be singled out to bear her burthen alone.]

3. It was, in her apprehension, penal—

[This adds a tenfold weight to any calamity which we are called to suffer: the wrath of God is the bitterest ingredient that can be infused into any cup. Hence was her grief so different from that which she had manifested on the former occasion: she regarded her calamity as a judgment sent from God. She knew that the famine had been sent for the wickedness of Israel, in answer to Elijah's prayers; she thought therefore that this affliction had been sent to her by the same means, and on the same account, namely, for some transgressions she had committed previous to his visit, or for some which he had seen during his continuance with her. And here we may observe, that this is a view in which afflictions readily appear to a humble mind. A person truly humbled, is jealous of himself, and apt to fear that he has offended God: and whilst an affliction regarded as a paternal chastisement, would be borne by him with grateful submission, the same, as a vindictive judgment, would utterly overwhelm him. To this consideration chiefly we ascribe the impatience that was manifested in the widow's address to the Prophet on this occasion: she spoke, not the result of her deliberate judgment, but the hasty dictate of an oppressed mind.]

Let us now turn our attention to,

II. Her deliverance—

The

[b] ver. 12.

The Prophet, animated by the highest and best of principles, overlooked her unjust reflections; and, filled with tenderest sympathy, took the child out of her bosom, and carried it to his chamber, and laid it on his own bed, and, as though he would have infused life into him out of his own body, thrice stretched himself upon the corpse; and, after crying earnestly to the Lord in behalf of the child, restored him back again to the mother a living child. This was a wonderful deliverance to the afflicted mother: let us notice,

1. How it was wrought—

[It were absurd to imagine, though some have been guilty of the absurdity, that the animal warmth of the Prophet had any efficacy towards restoring a dead corpse to life: it was by prayer alone that he prevailed. He begins with an humble expostulation with the Deity; not as though he thought the stroke unjust, but as fearing lest the enemies of Jehovah should take occasion from it to represent him as a hard master, whom it was in vain, and even dangerous, to serve. Such was the expostulation which Moses offered, when God had threatened to destroy the whole Jewish nation[c]: and no doubt, when dictated solely by a concern for the honour of the Deity, it is highly pleasing unto God; as its prevalence on this occasion fully proved. Next, he offers a petition, such as never had been before offered: "O Lord, my God, I pray thee, let this child's soul come into him again!" What a wonderful petition! How presumptuous does it at first sight appear! But it is our misfortune and our fault that we are not more enlarged in our petitions at the throne of Grace. I mean not to say, that *we* are authorized to ask for such an exertion of omnipotence as this; but this I say, that "we are not straitened in God, but are straitened in our own bowels;" and that that is the true reason of our receiving so little from God. However "wide we were to open our mouths, God would fill them," provided we asked in faith, and according to his will. Great as the petition was, God answered it in its utmost extent, and enabled the Prophet to present to the widow her child restored to life.]

2. How it was received—

[We may in some measure conceive the joy that would pervade the minds both of him who had obtained the blessing, and of her who received it. But the effect which the deliverance produced in enlarging her knowledge and confirming her faith, is that which particularly calls for our attention. Her trial had so discomposed

[c] Numb. xiv. 13—16.

discomposed her mind as for a moment to shake her faith in God. "How can this be the true God, who, after all his mercies to me, afflicts me thus? and how can this be a man of God, who makes me such a recompence for all my attention to him?" Nor let us wonder that a poor Gentile was thus shaken in her faith, when a similar effect was produced by an unexpected trial on one of the most distinguished servants of the Lord. Joshua, on the discomfiture of Israel before Ai, and the loss of about six and thirty men, actually expressed more than this poor widow even ventured to imagine[d]. Indeed this is the common fruit of affliction on our impatient minds: we are ready to ask, "Is the Lord among us, or not[e]?" But the manifestation of God's power and mercy dispelled the cloud, and led her to confess him as a gracious and faithful God. This was the effect produced on Moses after the passage of Israel through the Red Sea[f]: and it is the proper effect to be produced on all.]

Let us LEARN then from this history,

1. How to interpret providences—

[We are apt to listen to sense rather than to faith, and to say, "All these things are against me." But how can they be really *against* us, when God has promised, that all things should work together for our *good*. Against us they may be *in some points of view*; but they shall be for us *on the whole*. With what abundant benefit did this widow receive her child again! It is needless to repeat the benefits which Jacob ultimately received from the dispensation which he regarded as so calamitous. You all "know also *the end* of the Lord" in reference to Job, how abundantly his happiness was increased after his afflictions[g]. It may be that your *temporal* happiness may not be increased; but the loss of it shall be more than counterbalanced by your *spiritual* prosperity. What our Lord said respecting Lazarus, may be justly applied to every afflictive dispensation; "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby[h]:" and the reproof which our Lord afterwards gave to Martha, may justly be given to most of us; "Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God[i]?" Let us learn to regard afflictions as blessings in disguise; and let it be our endeavour to walk more by faith and less by sight; according to that direction of the Prophet, "Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness and hath no light? let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God[k]." If the dispensation be impenetrably dark, let it then suffice us to know, that "what we know not now, we shall know hereafter."]

2. How

[d] Josh. vii. 7—9. [e] Exod. xvii. 7. [f] Exod. xv. 11.
[g] Jam. v. 11. [h] John xi. 4. [i] ib. ver. 40.
[k] Isai. l. 10.

2. How to improve them—

[Every leaf in the book of providence is full of instruction respecting the perfections of our God. O what might we not learn of his wisdom, his power, his love, his faithfulness, if we were observant of his dispensations towards us? Many a time should we exclaim with the widow, "Now I *know* that his word is true;" I do not take it upon trust; I *see* it, I *know* it; and am ready to *attest* it before the whole universe. This is the kind of evidence which Job had, when he said, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee." A small measure of such experience as this is of unbounded value. If it were only for our own comfort, we should cultivate it to the uttermost; but it is of unspeakable benefit to those around us, inasmuch as it encourages them also to trust in God. See how David represents this when emerging out of temporal affliction; "Many shall see it," says he, and fear, and "shall trust in the Lord[l]:" and again, when brought up from the depths of spiritual trouble; "For this shall every one that is godly pray unto thee in a time when thou mayest be found[m]." The knowledge which we have of God and of Christ is mere theory, till we have learned the same by our own personal experience; but when our faith is confirmed by actual experience, then it is as convincing as sight itself. O that we may all aspire after this knowledge, and improve every dispensation for the attainment of it! then will it be to us a source of unclouded peace, and prepare us for that blessed place, where faith shall be lost in sight, and hope in enjoyment.]

[l] Ps. xl. 1—4. [m] Ps. xxxii. 3—6.

CCXXXIII.

OBADIAH'S EARLY PIETY.

1 Kin. xviii. 12. *I thy servant fear the Lord from my youth.*

IT is comfortable to reflect, that in the worst of times there are some who fear God, and that the state of religion is rarely so bad as it appears. The days of Ahab were peculiarly unfavourable to the existence of real piety in Israel: for, in addition to that king's personal aversion to every thing that was good, he was stirred up by Jezebel his wife to destroy every prophet in the land: and so bitter was he against Elijah in particular, that he sought him in all the adjacent countries, and even exacted an oath of their governors that they could not find him. But

But in the midst of all this wickedness, there was one even of Ahab's household, and he "the governor of his house," who retained his integrity, and used all his influence to protect the servants of the Lord. This man, constrained in vindication of his own character to bear testimony to himself, was enabled to declare to the prophet Elijah, "I thy servant fear the Lord from my youth."

In considering the subject of early piety, we shall notice,

I. Wherein it should consist—

[We would not on any account disparage devotional feelings: but we must entertain some jealousy respecting them as a criterion of early piety. We know their immense value;——— but we know also how susceptible of strong impressions the youthful mind is, on whatever subject it is occupied——— and that the characteristic mark of a very numerous set of unprofitable hearers is, that "anon they receive the word with joy." We must therefore look for some better and safer test of piety than this.

Nor would we by any means undervalue a clear knowledge of the Gospel. A view of ourselves as sinful creatures, altogether helpless and hopeless in ourselves, and a view of Christ as the only and all-sufficient Saviour of the world, and an habitual consciousness that we must receive every thing out of his fulness, all this, I say, is absolutely essential to the Christian character ——— but then it may all exist in the mind as a theory, without entering into the heart as a principle of life. Not only do the thorny-ground hearers evince this melancholy truth, but daily observation and experience compel us to acknowledge it———

There is however a test which is subject to no such uncertainties, namely, "the fear of God." By this we mean a reverential awe of the Divine Majesty, a dread of offending him, and a determination through grace to obey every one of his commandments——— This must be an abiding principle in the soul, operating as forcibly upon us in our most secret actions, as the presence of a fellow-creature would in reference to any thing which would expose us to universal execration.

Let it not however be supposed that we are now speaking of a slavish fear, arising from an apprehension of God's judgments: we speak of a filial fear, which is excited as much by a sense of "his goodness," as by a dread of his displeasure. And it is remarkable, that, when the prophet Hosea foretold the piety that should reign under the Gospel dispensation, and in the millennial period, he characterized it in the very way that we have now done: "They shall seek the Lord, and David their king;

king; and shall *fear the Lord and his goodness* in the latter days[a]."]

That we may be led to cultivate piety in early life, let us consider,

II. The great advantages of it—

"Godliness has the promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come:" and the earlier it is acquired, the more will its inestimable value appear. Consider its use,

1. To the person who possesses it—

[When religion has acquired a just ascendant over a young person, it will *determine his connexions;* (he will not be unequally yoked with unbelievers as friends, and much less in that relation of life which death only can dissolve:) it will also *form his habits,* leading him to the study of the holy Scriptures, to constant prayer, to holy watchfulness and self-denial, and to a conscientious regard to God in every thing that he does — — — It will also *facilitate his attainments:* it is scarcely to be conceived what difficulties they have to struggle with through life, who have spent their early days in sensual indulgences: but those who have been early trained in the exercise of self-denial are enabled with comparative ease to restrain forbidden appetites, and to mortify unhallowed affections. Not that a life of holiness is easy to any one: it is a constant warfare, as long as we continue in the body: but the more we exercise ourselves in it, the more effectual will our efforts be, and the more certain our victory.]

2. To the world around us—

[Early piety attracts particular attention, and produces great effects, in encouraging the young, and in putting to shame the old. Only compare the benefits which the world receives from one who has the fear of God in his heart, with the evils it derives from one who lives, as it were, "without God:" how many are instructed, and comforted, and edified by the one, whilst multitudes have reason to curse the day that ever they beheld the other! It is truly said by Solomon, that "one sinner destroyeth much good." Yes, one sinner encourages and hardens many others in their iniquities, and places a stumbling-block in the way of all who desire to return to God: and, if he afterward have repentance given him from the Lord, he would in vain attempt to undo a thousandth part of the evil that he has done: many of his former associates in iniquity cannot be found: many are gone into the eternal world beyond a possibility of redemption; and if he were to warn all those to whom he could get

[a] Hos. iii. 5.

get access, the greater part of them would only laugh at him, and think him mad. All these distressing consequences of iniquity are avoided by him who devotes his early years to the service of his God: and perhaps, instead of having to reflect on the ruin that he has brought on others, he will find many in the day of judgment to whom his words and his example have been a source of good.

What may be done by a single person even under the most unfavourable circumstances, we see in Obadiah: no less than an hundred of the Lord's Prophets did he conceal and nourish at his own expense, and at the risk of his own life; when, without his interposition, they would all have been put to death. And though we may never be in a capacity to render such a public service to the Church of God, we may be the means of keeping many from destruction, and of saving their souls alive.]

ADDRESS,

1. Those who are fearing God in their youth—

[We rejoice that there are many Obadiahs amongst us, and perhaps some Timothys also, who even "from their childhood have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make them wise unto salvation through faith that is in Christ Jesus." Happy people, and greatly to be envied, in thus consecrating to the Lord "the first-fruits" of your days! Regard not then the scoffs and ridicule of those who have no fear of God before their eyes? The day is coming when they will reproach themselves more than ever they reproached you, and applaud your choice far more than ever they condemned it[b].]

2. Those who have lost their youth without having yet obtained the fear of God—

[Ah! what have you lost! But blessed be God that you have not yet been given up to final condemnation. O listen to the voice of God, who says to you, "To-day, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts." Learn to improve the present hour, for you know not how soon your day of grace may terminate, and all possibility of salvation be cut off for ever.]

[b] Wisd. v. 3—6.

CCXXXIV.

DECISION OF CHARACTER.

1 Kin. xviii. 21. *And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.*

IF a heathen should visit this country in order to ascertain what our religion was, and whether it was such as it became him to embrace, he would be altogether at a loss what judgment to form respecting it. From what he saw and heard in our churches, he would form a most favourable conclusion: he would say, Those people worship one God: they approach him through one Mediator, who died for them on a cross, and now lives to make intercession for them in heaven: they receive from God a divine almighty Agent, whom they call the Holy Spirit; through whose gracious operations they are enabled to turn from sin, and to walk in the ways of righteousness and true holiness. They are certainly a holy people; for from time to time they intreat of God that they may be enabled to live a righteous, sober, and godly life, to the glory of his holy name. But if he followed us home to our houses, he would begin to doubt whether we had any religion at all amongst us. He would find no worship of God in our families; perhaps none, or at best a mere formal worship, in our closets: he would hear nothing about religion in our daily conversation: he would see nothing in our conduct that would distinguish us from the better sort of heathens, and much that the more decent heathens would be ashamed of. He would therefore conclude, that we had no fixed opinion about religion at all; that we did not believe our own creed; and that we thought people would be as happy without any religion, as even Christianity itself could make them.

Such was the state of Israel of old, except that there was an outward idolatry established amongst them, whereas the idols which we worship have their temples only in the heart. To bring the Jewish nation

nation to a more consistent state, the prophet Elijah expostulated with them in the passage before us; and, for their conviction, proposed to put it to the trial, whether Baal or Jehovah were the true God.

We do not intend to consider the text as connected with the history, because we reserve the history for a distinct discourse: we propose at present to illustrate and recommend *decision of character*.

Now decision of character ought to shew itself,

I. In our sentiments—

To form our opinions strongly upon doubtful points, or without sufficient evidence, is no part of that character which we wish to recommend: on the contrary, we would advise all to examine carefully every sentiment before they embrace it, and, when they have "proved all things, then to hold fast that only which is good." But

The sentiments which we profess to hold, are not doubtful—

[As Members of the Established Church, we hold that "there is one God, and one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself a ransom for all." We hold also, that "all who worship this God, must worship him in spirit and in truth;" and that it is not a mere bodily service that he requires, but the service of the heart, and the entire devotion of the soul. Respecting these two points, *the proper object of our service*, and *the service which we are required to render him*, we apprehend there can be no doubt at all. Whether we consult the precepts of the Gospel, or look at the examples of the holy Apostles, the matter is equally clear; we can have no doubt but that it is both our duty and our privilege to serve God, yea to serve him with our whole hearts — — —]

On these things therefore our minds should be fixed and decided—

[If we consult the opinions of those around us, we shall be continually wavering in our judgment. But it is not from the vain conjectures of men that we are to form our sentiments: let men speak as they will respecting the propriety of serving Mammon, and of being satisfied with mere forms of godliness; let them agree to call every thing else by the odious terms of fanaticism or hypocrisy; our judgment must not be in the least altered, unless they will undertake to convince us from the holy Scriptures. The word of God is the only standard of true doctrine; and to it we must adhere, though the whole universe should oppose

oppose us. The number of Baal's prophets gave them no advantage with respect to truth; nor were Elijah's sentiments the more questionable, because he alone was found openly to maintain them: truth is the same, whether maintained by many or by few: and when we know what is truth, we should suffer no considerations whatever to invalidate its force, or to obstruct its influence.]

But decision of character must shew itself also,

II. In our conduct—

The only use of right sentiments is to regulate our conduct. When therefore we are convinced that there is a God who has a right to all the love of our hearts, and the service of our lives, we should then set ourselves to serve him,

1. With ardour—

[Lukewarmness is but ill suited to the service of our God. "We might as well be altogether cold, as neither cold nor hot." We should be "fervent in spirit, while we serve the Lord." Do we pray to God? we should "pour out our souls before him." Do we render thanks? we should call forth "all that is within us to bless his holy name." "Whatever our hand findeth to do, we should do it with our might." The people who contended in the games, whether they ran, or wrestled, or fought, should be just representations of us: yea, inasmuch as our contests are more important than theirs, our exertions should be proportionably greater.]

2. With fortitude—

[No man can engage heartily in the Lord's service without finding much to try his courage. To be a thorough Christian, especially in some circumstances, requires as much intrepidity as to face an armed host. Many thousands there are, who could brave death on a field of battle, who yet could not endure scorn and contempt from an ungodly world. But in whatever way we may suffer persecution for righteousness sake, we should be ready to meet it: instead of being intimidated by the cross, we should rejoice and glory in it; and account death itself, in such a cause, to be rather an object of ambition, than of dread. If only we be convinced that the Lord is God, we should serve him without the smallest concern about the consequences which such conduct may bring upon us.]

3. With perseverance—

[We are as much in danger of drawing back through weakness, as of being turned aside by fear. There are many who have suffered much for the cause of Christ, who yet become "weary in well-doing." But we must never think that we have attained

attained any thing, as long as any thing remains to be attained. We must "forget what is behind, and reach forward to that which is before."[a] We must engage in the service of our God, not for a season only, but for life: and as long as life lasts, our motto must be, "This one thing I do." "If we put our hands to the plough, and look back, we are not fit for the kingdom of heaven."]

To RECOMMEND this decision of character to all who are journeying towards heaven, we observe, It is,

1. The easiest way—

[We know it is not easy to attain such a fixedness of mind and purpose: but, when we have attained it, our way is rendered far easier than when we are halting between two opinions or two courses[a]. The man who has not a fixed principle is doubting and hesitating, every step he takes: but he who inquires simply, What is duty? and What does my God require of me? has a plain path before him, and has nothing to do but to "walk in it."]

2. The safest way—

[When a man is desirous of going to the utmost verge of what is lawful, and of conforming to the world as far as will consist with a hope of final salvation, he must often stand on very slippery ground; and it must be a miracle indeed if he do not one day fall. But he who, with a noble contempt of earthly things, is enabled to seek only what shall be most conducive to his spiritual welfare, stands at a distance from temptation, and, by "walking uprightly, walketh surely[b]."]

3. The happiest way—

[Any deviation from the path of duty must of necessity weaken the testimony which conscience might give respecting the rectitude of our minds: and it is certain that God will not vouchsafe the witness of his Spirit to those whose hearts are not right with him. These sources of happiness therefore must be closed to those who are not of a fixed decided character. Indeed such persons have very little comfort in any thing: their regard for God prevents their full enjoyment of the world; and their love of the world renders it impossible for them to find any real delight in God. Their prospects of future happiness too are by no means cheering to their souls: for they have reason to fear, that God will not accept the service of a divided heart. On the contrary, the man "who follows the Lord fully," enjoys now that peace of God which passeth all understanding, and looks forward with confidence to that day, when he shall receive the plaudits of his Divine Master[c].

In

[a] Matt. vi. 22—24. [b] Jam. i. 8. 2 Pet. i. 10. [c] 1 John iii. 20, 21.

In every view, therefore, decision of character is most desirable: and it is better to maintain a holy firmness with Elijah, though we be opposed by the whole world, than to halt between two opinions, or to be attempting to reconcile the inconsistent services of God and Mammon.]

CCXXXV.

ELIJAH'S CHALLENGE TO THE PROPHETS OF BAAL.

1 Kin. xviii. 24. *Call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the Lord: and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God. And all the people answered, and said, It is well spoken.*

UNBOUNDED is the dominion which God exercises over the minds of men: "the hearts of kings are in his hands, and he turneth them whithersoever he will." The heart of Ahab was exasperated against Elijah in the highest degree; insomuch that he sought him not only throughout his own kingdom, but through all the neighbouring kingdoms, in order that he might wreak his vengeance upon him. Yet, behold, now Elijah presents himself before him; and the hands of the infuriated monarch are tied; yea, the Prophet sends him word that he is coming to meet him, and yet the king, who might have had a band of soldiers at his command, uses no means whatever to apprehend him. Moreover Elijah retorts upon him his injurious accusation, and tells him plainly, that *he* was "the troubler of Israel, by forsaking the Lord and following Baalim:" nay more, he enjoins the king to summon all the prophets of Baal to meet him at Mount Carmel; and the king obeys the mandate, as if he had been the subject, and Elijah the sovereign. When they were convened, the Prophet appears in the midst of them all, unprotected and alone; yet can neither the king, nor the people, put forth a hand to touch him; so awed were they and restrained by the invisible agency of Jehovah.

I. The challenge which Elijah gave the worshippers of

of Baal on this occasion, is the first point to which we shall call your attention—

Neither Ahab nor his prophets would submit to the declarations of God's word: of course, any appeal to the Mosaic writings would have been in vain. But the claims of Baal and of Jehovah might be tried by an appeal to miracles: to them therefore, doubtless by divine direction, he makes his appeal; and proposes, that "the God who should answer by fire," should be acknowledged as the true and only God. Mark,

1. The test proposed—

[No proposal could have been more *wise* than this. By such a test as this, the matter might be decided without giving any undue advantage to the worshippers of Baal. On their side were the king, the court, the prophets; so that, if any thing could have been effected by means of a confederacy, no doubt they would have strained every nerve to gain their point: and he, being alone, would have been borne down, as it were, by the popular current: but here was no scope for fraud; no contrivances of theirs could counterfeit the sign proposed; nor could any doubt remain on the minds of the spectators when the sign itself should really appear.

Nor could any proposal be more *equitable*. The very idea of a God supposes, that he is one who can vindicate his own honour, and maintain his own authority; and that he will do so when a just occasion calls for it. When therefore the point at issue between Jehovah and Baal was to be settled for the satisfaction of the whole world, it was reasonable that there should be some display of omnipotence resorted to as the means of establishing their respective claims.

Of all tests that could have been devised, none could be more *decisive* than that proposed. Omnipotence alone could so controul the elements, as to send down fire at the request of man. Satan indeed is called "the prince of the power of the air;" and on some occasions he has agitated the elements in a tremendous way. But his power is limited; and he can exert it only when, and as far as, God sees fit to suffer him. Could he have produced the sign in favour of Baal, doubtless he would have been glad to do so: but God's own character was at stake; and no such permission could be given him.]

2. The issue of the trial—

[The worshippers of Baal prepared their sacrifice, and continued from morning to mid-day imploring from Baal the proposed evidence of his divinity. No answer coming to them,

Elijah taunted them, and ridiculed their vain hopes———But they did not yet despair; yea rather, they renewed their application to Baal with redoubled earnestness, leaping upon, or around, his altar, and cutting themselves with knives and lancets, to mix their own blood with that of their sacrifice. But all their efforts were in vain: no voice, no answer came; and Baal was proved an impotent and senseless idol.

At the time of the evening sacrifice, *the very hour when the sacrifice was offered at Jerusalem*, Elijah repaired an altar of the Lord which had been broken down, and laid the bullock upon it in order, and, to shew that there was no collusion on his part, poured water in great abundance on the sacrifice, and on the wood, and filled with water also the trench that was round about the altar, and then made his supplication to his God, imploring from him the appointed sign, for the establishment of his own honour, and for the conversion of the people's souls. Instantly God answered in the appointed way; "a fire came down from heaven, and consumed not only the sacrifice and the wood, but the very stones of the altar; and licked up the water that was in the trench."

No doubt now remained. The people in the first instance had approved the proposed method of determining the point; and now "they fell upon their faces, and exclaimed, The Lord, He is the God! the Lord, He is the God!"

Thus we see the triumphant issue of the contest, and the indisputable right of Jehovah to the worship and service of the whole world.]

II. We now propose to give a similar challenge to all who worship the idols of their own hearts—

That all men are by nature idolaters is certain; for they all without exception "worship and serve the creature more than the Creator[a]." The prophet speaks of men "setting up idols in their own hearts;" and what those idols are, we are at no loss to declare; they are "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life"———

Now we have before established the principle, that the right of any Being to our worship ought to be judged of by his power to benefit those who devote themselves to him. Even the worshippers of Baal acknowledged the equity of this saying in reference to it, "It is well spoken." Let us then examine the claims of the world, and of Jehovah, by this test. Which of them ever has "*answered by fire*," or ever imparted

[a] Rom. i. 25.

imparted spiritual blessings to his worshippers? Which can communicate the blessing,

1. Of light?

[Behold the votaries of the world; What insight have they ever gained into any one spiritual truth? What do even the most learned amongst them know of the evil of sin, the beauty of holiness, the glory of Christ, or of a thousand other subjects connected with the spiritual life? Is it not found a truth, that "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned[b]?" — — —

On the other hand, is it not found, that the followers of Christ have the "eyes of their understanding enlightened;" and that "the things which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive, are revealed unto them by the Spirit[c]?" Yes, it is as true at this day, as it was in the hour when our Lord himself declared it, that "God hath hid these things from the wise and prudent, and has revealed them unto babes; even so, because it seemeth good in his sight[d]." He can have very little knowledge of the Christian world who is not acquainted with innumerable instances, wherein this assertion of our Lord is verified.]

2. Of strength—

[What lust have the votaries of the world been ever able to subdue? All, it is true, are not equally enslaved; but all are slaves to sin and Satan, though they do not all serve him in precisely the same way: as children of disobedience, they are under him as their god[e]; nor do any "recover themselves out of his toils, till Jehovah gives them repentance to the acknowledgment of the truth[f]" — — — Indeed the people of the world themselves confess this; for, when urged to walk according to the commandments of God, they do not hesitate to vindicate their disobedience by saying, that the obedience required of them is impracticable.

But does not our blessed Lord and Saviour communicate strength to his followers, so that they are enabled to "overcome the world," to "mortify the flesh," and to "bruise even Satan himself under their feet?" Yes, there is armour provided for them, through the proper use of which they are made victorious over all their enemies, "nor does any sin retain its dominion over them" — — — They do indeed often cry, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from this body of sin and death?" but they may always add, "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord."]

3. Of

[b] 1 Cor. ii. 14. [c] ib. ver. 9, 10. [d] Matt. xi. 25, 26.
[e] Eph. ii. 2. [f] 2 Tim. ii. 26.

3. Of peace?

[The voice of inspiration has plainly told us, that "there is no peace to the wicked." Their consciences indeed are often stupified, and even "seared as with a hot iron," so that they are altogether insensible of their state: and this insensibility is often mistaken for peace: but the votaries of this world are strangers to that delightful feeling which results from a sense of acceptance with God, and an assured hope of dwelling with him for ever — — —

But the follower of Christ has "a peace that passeth all understanding." "Being justified by faith, he has peace with God," together with a "joy unspeakable and glorified." This peace he has even when all his guilt is most present to his mind, and when death and judgment appear close at hand; because "he knows in whom he has believed," and is assured, that "there is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus." Hence he determinately obeys that injunction, "Thou shalt know no God but me: for there is no Saviour besides me[g]."]

Such are, in some little measure, the grounds on which we may decide between God and the world. We beg leave then to put to this whole assembly the following QUESTIONS;—

1. What is your judgment?

[Which has the better title to your love and service,—the world, or God? If "God be a wilderness to Israel," or, if the world can do more for you than He, then we are content that the world shall be your god, and that Jehovah shall hold an inferior place in your esteem: but if God is a fountain of living waters, and the whole creation be only as broken cisterns, then we call upon you to acknowledge "God as your God for ever and ever" — — —]

2. What should be your determination?

["Every man, as the prophet tells us, will walk in the name of *his* God," whatever his idol may be, whether pleasure, or riches, or honour: "and we also should walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever[h]." In this resolution we should be fixed[i]. What though all Israel be against us, and we stand alone? shall we withhold our testimony on that account? No: truth is truth, whether embraced by many or by few. The prophets of Baal were not at all the more right in their views, because they were so numerous; nor was Elijah the less right, because he had none to concur with him: nor did he account his singularity in what was good any reason for relinquishing it: on the

[g] Hos. xiii. 4. [h] Mic. iv. 5. [i] Hos. xiv. 8.

the contrary, though alone, he determined to adhere with all stedfastness to the Lord; and we in like manner should say with Joshua, "Though all Israel should depart from God, we and our houses will serve the Lord[k]" ———]

[k] Josh. xxiv. 15.

CCXXXVI.

ELIJAH VISITED AND REPROVED BY GOD.

1 Kin. xix. 11—14. *And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And behold the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks, before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a small still voice. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And behold there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah? And he said, I have been very jealous for the Lord God of Hosts; because the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword: and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life to take it away.*

THE history of all the saints of old sufficiently proves, that there is no such thing as sinless perfection to be found. There certainly have not been many more distinguished characters than Elijah; yet was he not exempt from sinful infirmities. Circumstances of peculiar difficulty are like a furnace that tries the gold; and highly favoured indeed must he be, who, when in them, does not shew that he has yet a remainder of dross, from which he needeth to be purged. Doubtless the trials of Elijah were very heavy: he had asserted the honour of Jehovah in opposition to Baal; and had obtained such a triumph as might well lead to expect a most successful issue to his labours, in bringing back the people to the acknowledgment and worship of the true God. Methinks, this hope gave lightness to his spirits, and added wings to his feet, when he ran before Ahab to Jezreel. But behold, he had scarcely

scarcely arrived at Jezreel, before Jezebel sent him word with bitter imprecations, that she would have him put to death within the space of one day. This so discouraged him, that he fled instantly to the land of Judah: and not thinking himself secure even there, he "left his servant behind him, and proceeded a day's journey into the wilderness." The condescension of God towards him on this occasion forms a striking contrast with his conduct. Let us notice,

I. The weakness of the Prophet—

It is justly said of him, and most probably in reference to these very events, that "Elijah was a man subject to like passions as we are[a]." In this part of his history we behold,

1. His unbelieving fear—

[On former occasions he had shewn great fortitude: he had just before dared to accuse Ahab to his face as "the troubler of Israel;" and to confront alone all the worshippers of Baal with 450 of his prophets at their head: he had also put all those prophets to death, and then had accompanied Ahab to Jezreel: but now his faith failed him, and he doubted whether his God could protect him from the rage of Jezebel. Hence, instead of prosecuting the advantage which he had gained, and encouraging all the people to follow up their convictions, he fled from the scene of danger, and, by his cowardice, caused the whole people of Israel to return to the worship of Baal, whom for a moment they had disclaimed. Alas! what is man, if left to himself! the most eminent saint, if unassisted by fresh communications of grace, sinks, and becomes, like Samson shorn of his locks, as weak as other men. In the instance before us we have a striking evidence, that man of himself can do nothing.]

2. His impatient desire—

[Wearied and disconsolate, he requested of God to "take away his life[b]." He had seen how little effect had been produced by former prophets; and from present appearances he thought that "he was no better than they," nor likely to have any more success; and therefore he desired a speedy termination of his fruitless troubles. But how unbecoming was this! Whether successful or not in his endeavours, he was glorifying God by them, and should have accounted that an ample reward for all that he could do or suffer in his cause. Had he desired to depart in order that he might have a richer enjoyment of his God, the wish

[a] Jam. v. 17. [b] ver. 4.

wish might have been good: but to desire death through mere disgust and weariness of life, was the sad fruit of criminal impatience.[c]]

3. His hasty self-vindication—

[When the Lord interrogated him, "What doest thou here, Elijah?" he thought of nothing but his own services, and the sins of others: yea, when the question was repeated, he returned the same answer. How strange that he should not, on the repetition of the question especially, suspect himself, and acknowledge that he had come thither without any call or direction from his God! But so it too often is with the best of men: they are more ready to look with complacency on their virtues, than with contrition on their sins; and to censure with severity the faults of others, whilst they overlook their own. According to the Prophet's own account, he had done nothing amiss: but, if he had fairly stated the whole matter, his criminality would instantly have appeared. This shews, that there is not a man in the universe whose representation can be fully trusted in things which affect his own character: there is a partiality in all, which leads them to some degree of concealment in their own favour, and *that*, not only in the things which concern their conduct towards men, but even in the things which relate to God.]

Let us now contemplate,

II. The goodness of God towards him—

God, ever slow to anger, and rich in mercy, exercised towards him the most astonishing kindness. Instead of noticing with severity what the Prophet had done amiss,

1. He supplied his wants—

[The Prophet had fled to the wilderness, where he could have no provision except by miracle; and he had little reason to expect, that, while he was fleeing from the path of duty, God would again interpose to feed him by ravens, or to point out another hostess that should sustain him by a miraculous supply of meal and oil. But God would not forsake his servant in his extremity: on the contrary, he now ministered to his wants by the instrumentality of an angel, giving him a miraculous supply of food, and afterwards sustaining him for forty days and nights without any food at all. How marvellously gracious is God to his offending creatures! Indeed, if he did not display in this manner the riches of his grace, where is the creature that could hope for any thing at his hands? But this is the constant method of his procedure with sinful men: he finds us outcast and helpless, and

[c] See the two contrasted; 2 Cor. v. 4. "Not to be unclothed, but clothed upon."

and he bids us live; and makes the depth of our misery an occasion of magnifying his own abundant mercy[d]: yea, "where sin hath abounded, grace oftentimes much more abounds[e]."

2. He reproved his errors—

[The question put to him was a kind reproof; it was, in fact, the same as saying, "Think whether thou hast not deserted the path of duty." And when the question had not produced its desired effect, he displayed before him the terrors of his Majesty in three successive manifestations of his power; and then, to soften and abase his yet unbroken spirit, he spake to him more effectually in a small still voice; thus renewing to him the wonders formerly exhibited on the same mountain unto Moses, both the terrific scenes of Sinai, and the milder display of his own glorious perfections. Truly it is amazing that the Almighty God should so condescend to the weakness of his creatures, and labour so to prepare their minds for the richer effusions of his grace and love.]

3. He rectified his apprehensions—

[Elijah supposed himself to be the only one in Israel that maintained a regard for God; but God informed him, that there were no less than seven thousand persons who had not yielded to the prevailing idolatry. What an encouraging consideration was this to the desponding Prophet! Well might he return to his labours, when so many yet remained, either to co-operate with him in his exertions, or to be benefited by his instructions. Indeed it is a most consolatory thought to the Lord's people in every age, that there are many "hidden ones," who serve and honour God in secret, though their light has not so shone as to attract the attention of the world around them: and the answer which God made to the Prophet on this occasion is adduced by St. Paul for this very end, namely, to shew us, that, in the very lowest state of the Church, there is, and ever shall be, "a remnant according to the election of grace[f]."]

Among the various lessons which this history is suited to teach us, we may LEARN,

1. To be diffident of ourselves—

[Who that sees how the great Elijah failed, whilst at the same time he was unconscious of his failings, must not be ready to suspect himself? If God say, "One of you shall betray me," the reply of every one should be, "Lord, is it I?" Let us then inquire with ourselves, "What do I here?" Am I in *the place* that God would have me? and in *the spirit* that God would have me? Even the Apostles themselves on some occasions "knew not what spirit they were of." Let us remember, that the

[d] Ezek. xvi. 4—6. [e] Rom. v. 20. [f] Rom. xi. 2—5.

the less we suspect ourselves, the more reason we have to fear that there is somewhat amiss in our conduct.]

2. To be confident in our God—

[We need look no further than to the history before us to see how exceeding abundant are the riches of God's grace and mercy. Surely the backsliders in heart, or act, may take encouragement to return to him——. In reference to the Church also, we may be well assured, that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."]

CCXXXVII.

CALL OF ELISHA TO THE PROPHETIC OFFICE.

1 Kin. xix. 21. *Then he arose, and went after Elijah, and ministered unto him.*

IT is an unspeakable consolation to an aged Minister to see others springing up around him, who shall carry on the same blessed work in which he has spent his life, and promote among the rising generation the Redeemer's interests, when he shall be removed to a better world. This happiness it pleased God to confer upon his servant Elijah. Elijah had thought himself alone in the kingdom of Israel; but God informed him, that there were no less than seven thousand others who had in heart adhered to him, though they had not openly testified against the worship of Baal. He moreover directed him to anoint Elisha to be a prophet in his room; and assured him, that the nation of Israel should continue to be benefited by the ministrations of his successor, when he should be removed from the world.

According to the direction given him, Elijah sought Elisha; and, finding him engaged in agricultural labours, called him from them to an employment altogether new and heavenly.

In this appointment of Elisha to the prophetic office there are two things to be noticed;—

I. His peculiar call—

Elijah, in passing by, cast his mantle upon Elisha. In this action there was nothing that could at all convey

convey the intent for which it was done; nor did Elijah utter a word in explanation of it: on the contrary, when he saw Elisha instantly running after him, he said, "Go back again; for what have I done unto thee?" But there was a secret power accompanying this act, which wrought effectually on the mind of Elisha, and constrained him to devote himself wholly to the Lord.

Now this will serve to shew the true nature of conversion in general.

God makes use of different means for the conversion of mankind—

[Many he awakens by some remarkable dispensation of his providence[a]——Many he enlightens by the preaching of his word——and many, without any external means, he leads to the knowledge of himself by the teaching of his Holy Spirit———]

But whatever be the means, the work is his alone—

[There is not any more power in the creature, no, not even in miracles, to effect the conversion of men, then there was in the mantle cast upon Elisha. There were thousands who saw and heard all that took place at our Saviour's death, as well as the Centurion, and yet remained unaffected with it. Multitudes also heard the preaching of our Lord and his Apostles without experiencing from it any saving influence. The external call, by whomsoever given, has been resisted by myriads in every age[b]. That which alone has made the difference between one man and another, has been the influence of the Holy Spirit accompanying the word: "Neither Paul nor Apollos could effect any thing; it has been God alone that gave the increase[c]:" He has "revealed his arm[d]," and made men "willing in the day of his power[e]:" He has "breathed upon the dry bones, and bid them live[f]."]

A divine energy was felt by Elisha; as appears clearly from,

II. His prompt obedience—

Instantly he ran after Elijah in token of his desire to become his stated attendant—

What appears to have expressed reluctance, proceeded in reality from no such feeling—

[Elisha

[a] Matt. xxvii. 54.
[b] Rom. x. 21. Matt. xxiii. 37.
[c] 1 Cor. iii. 5—7.
[d] Isai. liii. 1.
[e] Ps. cx. 3.
[f] Ezek. xxxvii. 1—10.

[Elisha desired to go home first and salute his parents, and then to wait upon Elijah. Had this arisen from a desire to defer his obedience to the heavenly call, it would have been wrong; because the call of God supersedes every other consideration under heaven[g]. But it arose from a love to his parents, and a desire to approve himself to them as a duteous son. He was sensible that they must wonder at the sudden change that had taken place in his views and conduct; and he was desirous to shew them at least that his zeal for God had not diminished his regard for them. In this view there can scarcely be a more useful example found in all the sacred records. Young people, when first made to feel the importance of a heavenly life, are apt to forget, that they ought by every possible means to win their parents. They should cultivate to the uttermost a meek, humble, conciliatory spirit; and shew, that, if they be constrained to act in opposition to the wishes of their superiors, they are not actuated by conceit or self-will, but by a sense of paramount obligation to God. They should be as careful as possible to evince the excellency of their principles by the modesty of their demeanor, and by their increased endeavours to fulfil every relative and social duty. This would render religion amiable in the eyes of many, who, in the conduct of their children or dependents, find nothing but stumbling-blocks and occasions of disgust.

The making a feast also of two of his oxen may appear strange: but we apprehend that it was done in much the same spirit as that which he manifested towards his parents. His destroying a yoke of oxen with their instruments might be intended, in part, to shew, that he henceforth renounced all secular employments; and, in part, to express love to all for whom he made the feast. In this view it strongly confirms all the foregoing observations respecting his parents; and teaches us to cultivate every benevolent disposition towards the people of the world, whilst we separate from their company, and condemn their practice. If from a sense of duty we "come out from them and are separate," and shun all unnecessary conformity to their ways, we should give them no room to think that we either hate or despise them; but should convince them, that, like Noah, we would press them all into the ark, if they would but listen to our voice, and comply with our advice.]

He instantly became an attendant on Elijah, and "ministered unto him"—

[Though from his ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen it appears that he was a man of some consideration, yet he did not think it any indignity to wait upon Elijah as a menial servant[h]. His reasons for this were various. He did it doubtless from a sense

[g] Luke ix. 59—62. [h] 2 Kin. iii. 11.

sense of love to God. Knowing that Elijah was greatly beloved of the Lord, and feeling that he himself had received through his instrumentality the richest blessings to his soul, he delighted to express his love to God by his zeal in the service of this distinguished prophet.

Moreover Elisha hoped now to be himself useful in advancing the cause of God in the land. It was true, that, as a novice, he could add but little to Elijah: but he hoped to learn from that honoured servant of the Lord, and to receive from his instructions and example, lessons, which might be of the utmost service to himself in the future execution of his own office: and for the attainment of such benefits he judged that no sacrifice could be too great, no service could be too laborious.

This shewed that there was on Elisha's mind not a mere transient impression caused by the novelty of this extraordinary call, but a real radical change of heart, agreeably to that which has been manifested by all true converts[i], and that which St. Paul represents as having taken place in the Macedonian church; "They gave themselves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God[k]."]

We shall CONCLUDE with a few words,

1. Of inquiry—

[We ask not whether any of you have ever been called either *suddenly* or *in any extraordinary manner* to serve God? but we ask whether your mind and heart have ever been so changed, that, from following nothing but this world, you have been brought to serve and follow the Lord Jesus Christ? This is a change which all must experience. This is conversion, in whatever way it is effected: and nothing but this constitutes conversion. Put away then all fanciful and enthusiastic notions about the *time* or the *manner* of conversion, and examine carefully into its *effects* as daily visible in your life and conversation———]

2. Of advice—

[If any of you are convinced that it is your duty to give up yourselves to God, guard against every thing that may cause you to waver in your purposes. Your dearest friends and relatives will be ready to say, "Spare yourself:" but you must not yield to any such intreaties. They will tell you, "That you will injure your worldly prospects:" but so did Elisha—"That there are few who approve and countenance such conduct:" but so Elisha found it, there being not one, except his master Elijah, that openly espoused the cause of God—"That you will subject yourself to persecution:" but it was in a season of bitterest persecution that Elisha joined himself to Elijah. As to *the manner* of

[i] Exod. iii. 1. Matt. iv. 18—29. & ix. 9. & xix. 27.
[k] 2 Cor. viii. 5. [l] Matt. x. 37.

of conducting yourselves towards your parents or superiors, we again say, Behave with meekness, with modesty, with love: "*Kiss* your father, and your mother:" but do not prefer them before your God. There are two extremes against which you must guard, namely, a rough, petulant, self-willed determination to follow your own way, without any regard to the feelings or sentiments of your superiors, on the one hand; and an easy complying temper that sacrifices duty to interest, on the other hand. The union of meekness with fidelity, and of love with firmness, is that at which you must aim; combining "the wisdom of the serpent with the harmlessness of the dove."]

CCXXXVIII.

AHAB'S SIN IN SPARING BENHADAD.

1 Kin. xx. 42. *And he said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Because thou hast let go out of thy hand a man whom I appointed to utter destruction, therefore thy life shall go for his life, and thy people for his people.*

IN every page of the holy Scriptures we are reminded, that the Lord disposeth of all events according to his sovereign will, whilst at the same time he suits his dispensations to the conduct of mankind. Between the parties spoken of in our text there was little difference with respect to their desert before God: Ahab was an idolatrous Israelite; and Benhadad was a proud atheistical heathen. God appointed them, as his instruments, to punish each other; his primary purpose indeed was to destroy the heathen prince, and to rescue from his tyranny the king of Israel. For this end, God left Benhadad to follow the dictates of his own proud spirit, and gave to Ahab the directions and encouragements that were necessary to ensure success. But Ahab neglected to execute the commands of God; and then God reversed his sentence, and denounced against Ahab and his people, the destruction that had been designed for Benhadad and his people. This is told us in the words which we have read; and which will serve to shew us,

I. The

I. The power which God will exercise towards us—

Great has been the temporal deliverance * recently vouchsafed unto us—

[What has been done for our Northern allies, has in reality been done for us. And, behold what a wonderful deliverance that is which the official reports announce to us! The resemblance between it and the facts recorded in the chapter before us is so striking, that, notwithstanding we do not in general approve of minute statements of this kind in a public discourse, we cannot forbear to point it out to you.

Behold then the origin of the contest between Benhadad and the king of Israel; the war was altogether unprovoked on the part of Ahab, and proceeded from the insufferable pride and tyranny of the Syrian monarch. Behold his boastings, whilst yet he was "only girding on his armour:" yet, notwithstanding his confederate armies were so numerous, he was vanquished by a little band of princes, whose efforts he utterly despised: and this proud boaster fled away on horseback from the field of battle, whilst his army was defeated with great slaughter. Mortified beyond measure, but not humbled, he determines to collect another army, numerous as the first, and to effect the destruction of his victorious enemy. At the return of the year he renews his attempts; but, notwithstanding the immense disproportion of the contending armies, he is again defeated with the loss of 100,000 men; and God completes his destruction by causing the walls of Aphek to fall, and bury in their ruins 27,000 more of those who had escaped the edge of the sword. Thus was this tyrannical oppressor constrained at last to hide himself in an inner chamber, and to become a suppliant for his own life.

Behold the parallel—The proudest and most tyrannical oppressor that has appeared in modern ages, invaded Russia for no other reason than because she would not be subservient to his will, and aid his ambitious designs. He went at the head of an immense army of confederate princes; boasting that no power could withstand him: but through the merciful intervention of Providence he has been vanquished, and that too by men whom he had despised as incapable of standing before a single regiment of his warriors; and he himself *fled on horseback from the field of battle*, and *hastened back in disguise* to his own country, *leaving his whole army to be a prey to the sword of the avenger, and to the elements*, which have left scarce any remaining to record the history of their disasters. This man however is now boasting, like Benhadad, that he will with the returning spring replace his armies, and renew his assaults. He pours the same contempt

* Preached a few days after Buonaparté's return to Paris, after the destruction of his army, and just previous to its utter annihilation.

contempt on God that the Syrian monarch did. Benhadad indeed did acknowledge his defeat to have proceeded from a superior Being, though he limited his power to the hills, and thought to overcome him in the plains: but this Atheistical Ruler discards God entirely, and talks of nothing but "fate and fortune." What shall be the issue of his future attempts, God only knows: but we think it highly probable, that he is working out his own destruction as Benhadad did.

We cannot fail of acknowledging the interposition of heaven in the history of Benhadad: let us be willing also most thankfully to acknowledge it in the events which we have just recited.]

Great also is the spiritual deliverance which God will vouchsafe to all who look unto him—

[The power of our spiritual enemies is infinitely more disproportionate to ours, than that of Benhadad to the king of Israel[a]——— But God has instructed us how to overcome them, and will enable us to do it[b]——— No enemy shall prevail against us, if only we rely on him, and follow his directions[c]——— His people in every age have been made victorious[d]——— and we also, if we fight manfully under the banners of the cross, shall have "Satan himself shortly bruised under our feet"———]

In this connection it is highly requisite to contemplate,

II. The fidelity we should exercise for him—

God punished Ahab for not executing faithfully the work assigned him—

[As Agag, king of Amalek, had formerly been delivered into the hands of Saul in order to his destruction, so was now Benhadad into the hands of Ahab. But Ahab elated with vanity spared the captive monarch, and restored him to his throne; and thus brought upon himself and upon his own people the destruction which was primarily intended for their Syrian enemies.

The way in which this sentence was denounced against him was very remarkable. A prophet was required to personate a wounded soldier, and by a well-contrived parable to get Ahab to condemn himself. The artifice succeeded; and Ahab did unwittingly condemn himself, and thereby justify God in executing upon him the sentence which he had passed upon the supposed offender. And it was but about three years afterwards that Ahab himself was slain in battle with the Syrian monarch, whom he had so inconsiderately spared.]

And shall not *we* be called to account for the manner

[a] Eph. vi. 12.
[b] ib. ver. 13—18.
[c] Isai. liv. 17. Rom. viii. 31—39.
[d] Heb. xi. 32—34.

manner in which we execute his commands in relation to our spiritual enemies?

[As to what may be God's will in reference to our great *temporal* foe, we presume not to judge: and where an express revelation is wanting, we must be guided by justice and political expediency. But respecting our *spiritual* enemies we have no doubt. He requires them all to be slain without exception: not one is to be spared. The great master sin, whatever it be, "the sin that most easily besets us," must be the object of our more determined hostility[e]. If one sin be spared, *our life must go for the life of that:* if it be dear as "a right eye," or necessary as "a right hand," we have no alternative, but to destroy it utterly, or to perish eternally "in hell fire[f]" ——— Shall we then rest content with any victory, whilst so much as one lust remains to be mortified and subdued? ———]

ADDRESS— .

1. The proud and presumptuous—

[Let not any imagine it an easy thing to get to heaven: our foes are exceeding numerous and powerful; and the more secure we are in our own conceit, the more certain we are to be subdued before them ——— "Let us not be high-minded, but fear."]

2. The timid and desponding—

[Our weakness, though a reason for crying mightily to God for aid, is no reason for despondency. "When we are weak, then are we strong," because God will then interpose to "perfect his own strength in our weakness." If, as we are told, "a worm shall thresh the mountains[g]," then need not any man fear, if only he go forth in Jehovah's strength, and follow the directions which God has given him. The language of the feeblest saint should be, "Who art thou, thou great mountain? Before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain[h]."]

3. The humble and victorious—

[Some there are who, though crying occasionally, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me?" are yet able to add with joy, "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord." Yes, many there are who can say, "Thanks be to God, who always causeth us to triumph in Christ!" Let them therefore be more and more joyful and confident in their God. But let none ever forget, that their enemies, however often repulsed, are watching for opportunities to renew their assaults. Whilst we are

[e] Heb. xii. 1.

[f] See how frequently this awful truth is repeated, and *this terrific language used*, in Mark ix. 43—48.

[g] Isai. xli. 14, 15. [h] Zech. iv. 7.

are in this world we must not for a moment lay aside our armour, or intermit our exertions. Soon the period of final victory shall arrive; and then shall we be invested with that glorious kingdom which God has promised to all that overcome[i].]

[i] Rev. iii. 21.

CCXXXIX.

AHAB AND ELIJAH IN NABOTH'S VINEYARD.

1 Kin. xxi. 20. *And Ahab said to Elijah, Hast thou found me, O mine enemy? And he answered, I have found thee.*

THE office of a Minister is doubtless the most honourable that can be sustained by man; but it is at the same time the most arduous. If indeed the people to whom we carry the glad tidings of salvation were willing to put away their sins and embrace the proffered mercy, there would be comparatively little difficulty in discharging our duty: but men are averse to receive our message: they "love darkness rather than light;" yea, they hate the light," and would even extinguish it, rather than be constrained to see the evil of their ways. Hence those Ministers who are faithful, are universally accounted "the troublers of Israel," and the "enemies" of those whom they labour to convert: and they must go with their lives in their hands, if they will approve themselves to God and to their own conscience. The justice of this observation is manifest from the address of Ahab to the prophet Elijah: in which we see,

I. How greedily men commit sin—

Horrible beyond measure was the conduct of Ahab which is here recorded—

[We blame not his wish to be accommodated with Naboth's vineyard; nor the equitable offers which he made to obtain it: but we blame the inordinate desire which he entertained for so worthless an object, and the vexation which the disappointment of it occasioned. What a striking proof have we here of the misery which unsubdued lusts create! A king possessed of large dominions, augmented lately by the acquisition of immense power, is dejected, and sick at heart, because he cannot obtain a little plot of ground adjoining to his palace, of ground which

the owner could not alienate consistently with the commands of God.

Jezebel his wife, indignant that a potent monarch, like him, should be thwarted in his desires, undertakes that they shall not long be ungratified. She takes his seal, and gives orders in his name, that the elders of Israel shall proclaim a fast, as if some great iniquity which menaced the safety of the state had been committed; that then they shall arrest Naboth as the guilty person, and suborn false witnesses, who shall accuse him of blaspheming God and the king; and that they shall instantly proceed to stone him to death. Shocking as this injustice was, methinks its enormity was small in comparison of that impious mockery of religion with which it was cloked. But what must have been the state of that nation where such an order could be given so confidently, and be carried into execution with such facility! Truly we can never be sufficiently thankful for the equity with which our laws are administered in Britain, and the security which we enjoy, both of our lives and property, under their protection.

The tidings of Naboth's death being announced by Jezebel, Ahab instantly proceeded to take possession of his vineyard; manifesting thereby his perfect approbation of all that Jezebel had done. Conscious of his cordial participation in her crimes, he could make no reply to the Prophet's accusation, "Hast *thou* killed, and also taken possession?" He could only say, "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" In truth, his own conscience testified against him, that "he had sold himself to work evil in the sight of the Lord."]

Horrible as this was, and far surpassing any thing which is commonly found amongst us, it yet is in many respects imitated by the great mass of mankind—

[It is surely no uncommon thing for men at this day to covet what belongs not to them, and so inordinately to desire it as to use unlawful and dishonest means of obtaining it. Nor is it uncommon for men to feel a disappointment so acutely, as to lose the enjoyment of every thing they possess through vexation about something unpossessed. And so are the consciences of some men formed, that they will connive at wickedness which of themselves they would not perpetrate, and avail themselves of the advantages which the iniquity of others has procured for them. Let valuable articles be offered for sale as having been clandestinely imported without a payment of the accustomed dues; how few will turn away from them on account of the unlawful way in which they have been procured! How few will say, "Perhaps a conflict has been maintained for these, and the blood of some revenue-officer has been shed to preserve them:" at all events such

such risks are incurred by this traffic, and the lives of multitudes are daily endangered by it; and shall I satisfy my appetite with that for which so many "have jeoparded their lives[a]?" No: the generality of persons, who yet pretend to be honest and humane, will be as pleased with the possession of what has been thus iniquitously gained, as ever Ahab was with the acquisition of Naboth's vineyard.

Again, there are those who for lucre's sake will aid in betraying or corrupting an innocent unsuspecting female: and how many are there who would readily enough avail themselves of an advantage so obtained; or at least conspire to rivet the chains once forged, and to derive pleasure to themselves from the misery of their fellow-creatures!

Alas! the world is full of characters, whose "hearts are exercised with covetous practices[b]," and who "work all uncleanness with greediness[c]," or, as the Prophet expresses it, "do evil with both hands earnestly[d]."]

If we presume to remonstrate with such persons, we shall soon see,

II. How indignantly they take reproof—

Great was the indignation which Ahab expressed against Elijah—

[Possibly there might be some surprise expressed in that question, "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" Certain it is that Ahab little expected to find Elijah there; nor would he have gone down to the vineyard of Naboth, if he had at all conceived that he should have met there such an unwelcome monitor. But there was also much wrath contained in this address: "What business hast thou here? What dost thou mean by presuming to interfere with me? Art thou privy to what has been done? and art thou come to gratify thy spleen as in past times by denouncing judgments against me?" Never was a human being so odious in Ahab's eyes, as Elijah was at this moment.]

This however only shews what is in the heart of all against the faithful servants of the Lord—

[Ministers are sent by God as monitors, to "shew the house of Jacob their sins[e]:" but who welcomes them in that character? Let them go to any company, or even to an individual, that is violating the laws of God, and let them testify against the evil that is committed; will their admonitions be received with thankfulness? Will not their interposition be deemed rather an impertinent intrusion? Yes; such is the light in which it will be

[a] 2 Sam. xxiii. 15—17. [b] 2 Pet. ii. 14. [c] Eph. iv. 19.
[d] Mic. vii. 2, 3. This paints with great exactness the conduct of multitudes who tread in the steps of Ahab: and the last clause expresses their complacency in their sins. [e] Isai. lviii. 1.

be viewed, *however gross and unjustifiable the sin is that has been committed.* When Amaziah had conquered the Edomites, he took their gods to be his god in preference to Jehovah; and when Jehovah sent him a prophet to remonstrate with him on the folly and impiety of his conduct, instead of yielding to the reproof, he threatened the prophet with death, if he did not instantly "forbear[f]." In the same light it is viewed, *however gentle and kind the expostulation may be.* When the inhabitants of Sodom required of Lot to deliver up to them the men whom he had received under his roof, nothing could exceed the tenderness of his reproof; "I pray you, brethren, do not so wickedly." Nay, he even adopted the unjustifiable expedient of offering them his two daughters in their stead: yet notwithstanding this astonishing condescension, they were full of wrath against him, and threatened to "deal worse with him than with them[g]." We must further say, that it was viewed in this light, *when God himself became the monitor.* When Cain had murdered his brother Abel, God came to him and asked, "Where is Abel thy brother?" to which this impious reply was made, "I know not: Am I my brother's keeper[h]?" The truth is, that men think themselves at liberty to do what they please against God; but no one is to presume to espouse the cause of God against them[i]. The plain language of their hearts is, "Our lips are our own: Who is Lord over us[k]?"

It would be well too if this presumptuous spirit were confined to those who are the open enemies of God: but it is not unfrequently found even amongst the professed followers of Christ; for it was to such that the Apostle addressed himself, when he said, "Am I become your enemy because I tell you the truth[l]?" Let religious professors be on their guard against this great evil; for, in proportion as it prevails, it gives reason to fear that they are deceiving their own souls, and that their religion is vain.]

But how boldly soever they reply against God, we may see in the answer of Elijah,

III. How certainly they ruin their own souls—

The fearless Prophet soon taught the murderous monarch what he was to expect—

["I have found thee;" and God has found thee, and his judgments ere long will find thee too. Agreeably to the prediction of Elijah, though the judgments were deferred in consequence of Ahab's forced humiliation, the blood of Ahab, like Naboth's, was licked by dogs, and the body of Jezebel was devoured by them in the very place where Naboth had been destroyed by her command. And, not long after, the elders of that

[f] 2 Chron. xxv. 16. [g] Gen. xix. 5—9. [h] Gen. iv. 9.
[i] Am. v. 10. [k] Ps. xii. 4. [l] Gal. iv. 16.

that very city Jezreel, who at the command of Ahab had slain Naboth, slew all the seventy sons of Ahab in one single night at the command of Jehu[m]: so exactly were the threatened judgments of Elijah executed upon him and upon his whole family.]

In like manner shall the judgments of God overtake all who continue obstinate in their sins.—

[" He that being often reproved, hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, saith the Lord, and that without remedy." Men hope that " they shall escape for their wickedness :" but God beholds it, and will call them to account for it in due season. It is in vain to think that any thing shall be hid from him; for " there is no darkness nor shadow of death, where the workers of iniquity may hide themselves[n]." Adam, after the commission of his sin, hoped to hide himself from God; but God sought him out; "Adam, where art thou?" Achan thought he had altogether escaped notice; but God appointed the lot to fall upon him, when, according to human calculations, the chance was two millions to one in favour of his escape. On many occasions too the punishment has instantly followed the detection, as in Gehazi's leprosy, and the sudden death of Ananias. But where the sins of men remain concealed or unpunished in this world, they shall not escape notice in the world to come; for " God will bring every secret thing into judgment;" and fulfil in its utmost extent that awful declaration of the Psalmist, "making them like a fiery oven in his anger, and swallowing them up in his wrath[o]."]

This subject speaks powerfully to DIFFERENT CHARACTERS;

1. To wilful and impenitent transgressors—

[What Moses said to all Israel, we must say to you, " Be sure your sin will find you out." You may glory in your success, and " roll your iniquity under your tongue as a sweet morsel, as Ahab did, but your sin shall ere long meet you to your sorrow and confusion; yea every sin that you have ever committed shall meet you at the bar of judgment; and, when addressed by you as Elijah was, shall return you the same answer as he did to Ahab; " Hast thou found me, O mine enemy? I have found thee." The long-suffering of God may bear with you for a season; but " your judgment lingereth not, and your damnation slumbereth not[p]."]

2. To those who have repented of their sin—

[Your sins, purged away by the precious blood of Christ, shall be sought for, but not be found[q]: God has " blotted them out

[m] 2 Kin. ix. 26. [n] Job xxxiv. 21, 22. [o] Ps. xxi. 8, 9.
[p] 2 Pet. ii. 3. & iii. 9. [q] Jer. l. 20.

out as a morning cloud," and "cast them all behind him into the very depths of the sea[r]." It is an express engagement of his covenant, that "your sins and iniquities he will remember no more[s]." Think, my Brethren, what an unspeakable mercy this is, and let it be your daily and hourly employment to abase yourselves before God, and to wash in the fountain of your Redeemer's blood.]

3. To those who are God's messengers to a guilty world—

[It is at the peril of the watchman's soul, if through sloth or cowardice he neglect to warn men of their approaching danger. Brethren, we must, like Elijah, put ourselves in the way of sinners, and bear testimony for God against them. This is a painful, but necessary duty. You admire the discharge of it in Elijah; do not then disapprove of it in us. But we must "speak, whether ye will hear, or whether ye will forbear." God's command is plain, "He that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully[t]." O that every servant of the Lord might resemble this man of God! and that instead of having to appear as witnesses against you at the bar of judgment, we might now find you obedient to the word, and have you in that day as "our joy and crown of rejoicing" for evermore!]

[r] Mic. vii. 18, 19. [s] Heb. x. 17. [t] Jer. xxiii. 28, 29.

CCXL.

THE FEIGNED REPENTANCE OF AHAB.

1 Kin. xxi. 27—29. *And it came to pass, when Ahab heard those words, that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly. And the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before me? Because he humbleth himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days; but in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house.*

MUCH there is which bears the semblance of religion, and which brings with it a present reward, whilst in the sight of God it is of no avail for the salvation of the soul. The hopes of the presumptuous, the fears of the desponding, the joys of the hypocrite, and the sorrows of the worldly, are of this kind. An instance of the last occurs in the passage which we have just read; wherein Ahab's repentance was honoured with the notice and approbation

bation of heaven to a certain degree, though we have no reason to think that it ever availed for his final acceptance before God.

In speaking of Ahab's repentance, we propose to shew,

I. What there was in it that was good—

If there had not been something good in it, God would never have called the attention of Elijah to it, or have honoured it with a reward. The two principal things in it that were good, were,

1. A fear of God's judgments—

[Many, when God's judgments are denounced against them, only "puff at them[a]" as unworthy of any serious regard. They do not believe that God will execute them: the language of their hearts is, "God will not do good, neither will he do evil[b]"——— But Ahab credited the predictions of the Prophet, and sought deliverance from the judgments he foretold. *This* it was that prevailed in behalf of the Ninevites, when "they repented at the preaching of Jonah[c];" and God on the present occasion was so pleased with it, that he pointed it out with special approbation to the prophet Elijah.]

2. An acknowledgment of God's justice in inflicting them—

[Had Ahab thought himself unjustly dealt with, he would have complained of the severity of the sentence that was passed against him: but he complained only of his own sins, which had so justly brought on him the divine displeasure. This was a public testimony that God was worthy to be served, and that the most exalted monarchs are bound, as much as others, to be obedient to his laws. Such an acknowledgment, from so abandoned a character, was honourable to the Lord: it "gave glory to him[d]" as a God of holiness and power, and consequently was so far good and acceptable in his sight.]

Still, as it availed not for his salvation, it will be proper to shew,

II. Wherein it was defective—

The terms wherein it is set forth are doubtless strong; but yet it was altogether defective;

1. In its principle—

[If there had been no punishment denounced against him, Ahab would have felt little concern about his iniquities: he had no

[a] Ps. x. 4, 5. [b] Am. ix. 10. Zeph. i. 12. Mal. ii. 17.
[c] Jonah iii. 5, 10. [d] Josh. vii. 19. Jer. xiii. 16, 18.

no real hatred of sin, no ingenuous shame on account of his having transgressed against so good a God. It was fear, and fear only, that called forth his penitential acknowledgments. But, if his repentance had been genuine, he would have mourned for his sins even though there had been no punishment annexed to them[e]; he would have seen an hatefulness in them, as transgressions of the holy law of God; and would have hated and abhorred himself on account of them, even though God should have blotted them from the book of his remembrance[f]. Hatred of sin, and not fear of punishment, is the true source of penitential sorrow.]

2. In its measure—

[His repentance was expressed only by external signs, such as fasting and clothing himself with sackcloth: but it should have proceeded to operate in the renovation of his heart and life. He should have instantly begun to put away his sins. But we read not of any such effects produced upon him. He turned not from his idolatry, nor did he, as far as we know, restore the vineyard to Naboth's family. But true repentance would have led him to mortify his besetting sins[g]: that alone is the repentance which is not to be repented of.]

3. In its end—

[Could Ahab have escaped the miseries he had brought upon himself, he would have been contented though God had still been as much dishonoured as ever. He had no view to God's glory, but only to his own safety. But if his sorrow had been of a godly sort, he would have inquired, how he might best counteract all the evil he had done, and cause his subjects to honour Jehovah as much as they had before slighted and despised him[h].]

Neverthless God was pleased to reward it: and it is of importance to inquire,

III. What the honour which God put upon it was designed to teach us—

It was designed to shew,

1. That God will not overlook the smallest things that are done for him—

[We have many instances in Scripture of actions rewarded, even where there was little, if any, reference to him in the minds of the actors. Ebed-melech had some regard to God in the services he rendered to Jeremiah the prophet: Jehu was more actuated by pride than any feeling of true piety: and Nebuchadnezzar, in his siege of Tyre, had not the least idea that he was doing

[e] Ezek. xx. 43. & xxxvi. 31. [f] Ezek. xvi. 63.
[g] Hos. xiv. 1—3, 8. [h] 2 Cor. vii. 10, 11.

doing Jehovah's work: yet were they all rewarded for the services they performed[i]: and if those of us who have done the least for God would consult the records of their lives, they would find that he has in some way or other recompensed to them whatever they have done, and never long continued in their debt.]

2. That he will surely receive every true penitent—

[St. Paul, in reference to the rites of the ceremonial law, argues thus: "If the blood of bulls and of goats availed for the least things, how much more shall the blood of Christ avail for the greatest[j]." In like manner we may justly say in reference to the history before us, if the feigned repentance of Ahab availed for the deferring of temporal judgments, how much more shall true repentance avail for the removal of all sins, and for the everlasting salvation of the soul! Let any one only see how God longs to behold his people returning to him[k], ——— and how he rejoices over them when they do return[l], ——— and we shall not doubt, but that instead of "willing the death of any sinner, he desires that all should turn from their wickedness and live[m]." "He will not despise the day of small things[n];" but will hear the groans, and regard the sighs, and treasure up the tears, of all who truly turn unto him. He never has said, nor ever will, "Seek ye my face in vain."]

We cannot CONCLUDE without a few words,

1. Of caution—

[Many there are who conceive that they have repented, because they can look back upon some time when they were humbled before God, either in an hour of sickness, or after some awakening discourse. But those temporary affections of the mind are a very small part of true repentance: they have been experienced by thousands, who yet have "turned back with the dog to his vomit, or the sow to her wallowing in the mire[o]!" Let it be remembered therefore, that if we dissemble with our God, his sword shall certainly overtake us[p] ———You have been long and faithfully warned of your danger; and if you despise the admonitions of the weakest of God's servants, it will insure and aggravate your eternal condemnation[q].]

2. Of encouragement—

[It is not said of him in vain, that "with him there is mercy and plenteous redemption." Do but bear this in mind, and you will frequently put yourselves in the posture of Ahab, and "walk softly"

[i] 2 Kin. x. 30. Jer. xxxviii. 7—10. with xxxix. 15—18. Ezek. xxix. 17—20. [j] Heb. ix, 13, 14. [k] Luke xv. 5, 9, 23, 24.
[l] Jer. xiii. 27. Hos. viii. 5. & xi. 7, 8.
[m] Ezek. xxxiii. 11. 1 Tim. ii. 4. 2 Pet. iii. 9.
[n] Hos. iv. 10. [o] Ps. lxxviii. 34—37. Hos. v. 15.
[p] Jer. xlii. 20—22. [q] 2 Chron. xxxvi. 12, 17.

softly" before him all the days of your life. Were it only temporal deliverance that you had a right to expect, it would be right to mourn as Ahab did: but when God promises to multiply his pardons beyond the utmost reach of your sins[r], you may be sure that nothing shall ever be wanting to those who seek him with their whole hearts. O that God might now see in us occasion to address the angels as he did Elijah; See ye how those people humble themselves before me? Because they so humble themselves, and "wash in the fountain" of their Redeemer's blood, "their iniquities shall all be blotted out," and "cast behind me into the depths of the sea!"]

[r] Isai. lv. 7. Rom. v. 20.

CCXLI.

SATAN'S STRATAGEM TO DECEIVE AHAB.

1 Kin. xxii. 19—23. *And he said, Hear thou therefore the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by him, on his right hand and on his left. And the Lord said, Who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead? And one said on this manner, and another said on that manner. And there came forth a spirit, and stood before the Lord, and said, I will persuade him. And the Lord said unto him, Wherewith? And he said, I will go forth, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, Thou shalt persuade him, and prevail also: go forth, and do so. Now therefore, behold, the Lord hath put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these thy prophets; and the Lord hath spoken evil concerning thee.*

IN order to have a correct view of Scripture truths, we must consider particularly the style in which the Scriptures are written. They are accommodated to the weak apprehensions of fallen man. Hence in various descriptions of the Deity, he is represented as having eyes and ears and hands, and as deliberating and acting according to circumstances, just as if he were a man like unto us. But we must not therefore conceive of him as a man, but only as ordering his dispensations towards us with unerring wisdom. In like manner he is represented in the text as holding a conference with Satan, and as adopting a plan proposed by him for the effecting of purposes

purposes originating with himself. But we must not therefore suppose that God did not know how to effect his own purposes without any help from Satan: we must only understand that God overruled the devices of that wicked fiend for the accomplishment of his own will.

Indeed the particular representation here given has an evident reference to what had actually taken place between the two confederate kings. They had put on their royal robes, and seated themselves on thrones in the midst of all their courtiers[a], in order to receive the counsel of the prophets respecting the projected war: and, agreeably to that, the prophet represents the Deity as enthroned amidst all the heavenly hosts, and holding a counsel with them about the best method of inflicting on Ahab his deserved punishment. It is not intended that we should construe this literally, as if all these questions and answers were really uttered by the different parties in a public assembly; but merely that God determined to make the designs of Ahab the means of his destruction.

There is however one point which may obviously be collected from this account, namely, *the power of Satan to deceive men*; and it will form a very profitable subject for our present consideration. Let us then inquire into,

I. The sources of his power—

Satan has from the beginning been the great deceiver of mankind. But whence has he this power to deceive? We answer,

1. From his having so many other spirits under his command—

[The fallen angels are many in number, and so numerous, that one single person possessed by devils called himself "Legion," because of the exceeding greatness of the number that dwelt within him. Of these there are different ranks and orders, just as there are of the good angels; and they are all united under one head, even "Beelzebub, the prince of the devils." Of Ahab's prophets there were four hundred; and, through the influence

[a] ver. 10.

influence of one spirit, they were all possessed by spirits perfectly united with each other for the accomplishment of one end. Now this gives them an immense advantage. Had there been but one, or only a few, we might have hoped to escape their notice, or be visited by them but seldom: but there is reason to believe that they are immensely more numerous than the human race, so that there is not a human being that is not infested with them, nor a moment of time when they are not ready to take advantage of us.]

2. From his wisdom and subtlety—

[" The serpent was the most subtle of the brute creation," and was therefore made use of by Satan as an instrument whereby to deceive our first parents: and in reference to that event, Satan is called " that old serpent, the Devil[b]." Of his subtlety there is much spoken in the holy Scriptures. Like a fowler he spreads his net, and " takes men alive in his snare[c]:" and so deep are his " wiles" and " devices," that no human wisdom can fathom them, no human sagacity escape them. As a spirit, he is a pure intelligence, like the holy angels, disrobed indeed of his holiness, but not of his intellectual powers. He knows what is suited to the dispositions of men, and what is most likely to prevail with them under all the circumstances wherein they are placed. In his assaults on our blessed Lord, he seized the moment most favourable for his purpose, and urged the temptations most likely to prevail: and it is reasonable to suppose, that the experience of six thousand years has contributed not a little to his proficiency and advancement in every species of guile.]

3. From his easy access to the minds of men—

[A *material* being would have found difficulty in presenting himself to men on many occasions: but an *immaterial* or *spiritual* Being finds no obstacles, except what arise from the internal principles of those whom he would assault. He has access to one as well as another at all times. What an immense advantage does this give him! Indeed, if it were not that we have good angels also attendant on us and ministering unto us, and, above all, that we have the Spirit of the Living God continually dwelling in us for the express purpose of counteracting and defeating his influence, we could have no hope whatever of escaping from his toils.]

4. From the number and influence of his confederates—

[There is not a wicked man in the universe who is not actuated by him, and made subservient to his designs: from all of them therefore he derives much support; but especially from those, whose situation in life gives them greater sway over the public

[b] Rev. xii. 9. [c] 2 Tim. ii. 26. The Greek.

public mind. If he can prevail on a prince or monarch to exert his influence, he will gain a rapid ascendancy over a whole kingdom. The instant that Jeroboam set up his golden calves, the whole people of Israel "willingly ran after his commandment." And if he can prevail on those in the prophetic office to sanction error by their preaching, or iniquity by their conduct, he will easily draw in their train the great mass of their followers. The text shews us how the united testimony of four hundred prophets deceive even the pious Jehosaphat: and the more pretensions to piety such prophets make, the more useful to Satan will their labours be; since he never exerts himself with more effect than when he "transforms himself into an angel of light[d]."]

5. From the willingness of men to be deceived—

[This perhaps is the greatest source of his power. Men are not impartial judges of good and evil, or of truth and error: their judgment is warped: they have corrupt inclinations which bias them[dd]: their own "heart is deceitful, and desperately wicked:" and hence, when Satan has undertaken to assault them, he finds traitors in their own bosoms ready to open the gates to him, and to admit him into the very citadel, before they are aware of his approach. The truth of this is manifested whenever an attempt is made to suppress evil or inculcate good. We see in a moment to which side men lean, and that arguments are weighed, not according to their real solidity, but according to the aspect they bear on our favourite propensities. Of course, this is extremely favourable to the interests of Satan, who needs only to present things to us in a specious view, and is sure beforehand that we shall be as ready to comply with his temptations, as he is to solicit our compliance. The case of Ahab is one of daily occurrence: thousands there are who hate the light, and say to their Ministers, "Prophesy unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits[e]." It is obvious therefore that Satan finds in the very dispositions of men the most successful advocate, and able coadjutor.]

Having seen the sources of his power to deceive, we proceed to point out,

II. The limits—

Doubtless his power is inconceivably great, since he deceived man even in his state of innocence, and from that time has "deceived the whole world[f]." But his power is limited,

1. In its duration—

[Satan shall not always have the ascendant that he now has:

[d] 2 Cor. xi. 13—15.
[dd] Isai. xliv. 20. Jer. viii. 5. & ix. 6.
[e] Jer. v. 31.
[f] Rev. xii. 9.

has: there is a time coming, (and, we hope, at no great distance now,) when he shall "be bound, and deceive the nations no more for the space of a thousand years[g]." What a blessed period will that be! What peace, and joy, and holiness will abound in the Church, when that wicked fiend shall cease from defiling and troubling the souls of men[h]! ——— O that the happy period were arrived! May "God hasten it in his time!"]

In its objects—

[Wide as his influence is, it is not universal; for God has delivered his chosen people from his malignant influence. We say not indeed that there are any so delivered, but that they need to be continually on their guard against him[i]. But our Lord has assured us, that "it is not possible for him to deceive the elect[k]:" and the reason of this is, that God has discovered to them his devices[l], ——— and armed them against his assaults[m], ——— and engaged to "guide them by his counsel, till he receives them to glory[n]." ——— A further reason is, that Jesus, our all-prevailing Advocate, "intercedes for them, that their faith may not fail[o]:" and hence it was, that, whilst "Satan desired to have Peter, as well as Judas, to sift him as wheat," he could prevail over him only for a season; so that Peter rose again and overcame him, whilst Judas hanged himself, and became the everlasting prey of the destroyer.]

3. In its operations—

[Satan could only "*persuade*" Ahab; he could not *compel* him; nor can he influence any man in opposition to his own will. He is "a roaring lion;" and all before him are but as lambs: yet in prosecuting his malignant purposes against them, he destroys those only "whom he *may* devour," not those whom he *would*[p]. This is a most encouraging circumstance: for, if only we cry to God for grace to desire, and strength to do, his will, we may defy all the hosts of hell: such resistance overcomes Satan, and makes him flee[q]. No fiery dart that he can cast at us will pierce the shield of faith; nor all his skill enable him to withstand the sword of the Spirit[r], when wielded by a believing hand———]

ADVICE—

1. Guard against obstinacy in sin—

[A wilful perseverance in sin constrains God to give men over

[g] Rev. xx. 1—3, 7.
[h] Zech. xiv. 20, 21. with Isai. xxx. 26. & lx. 19—22.
[i] Zech. iv. 1. Matt. xxvi. 41. 2 Cor. xi. 3. [k] Matt. xxiv. 24.
[l] 2 Cor. ii. 11. [m] Eph. vi. 11. [n] Ps. lxxiii. 24.
[o] Luke xxii. 31, 32. [p] 1 Pet. v. 8.
[q] 1 Pet. v. 9. & Jam. iv. 7. [r] Eph. vi. 16, 17.

over to their own lusts[s], and to leave them in the hands of their great adversary. To what a fearful extent God will proceed against us in this way, we cannot even read without horror[t]. Beloved Brethren, let me intreat you not so to provoke your God, as to bring upon yourselves this fearful curse. If once God say, "He is joined to idols, let him alone[u]," it were better for you that you had never been born.]

2. Seek an interest in the Lord Jesus Christ—

[Christ has vanquished that great enemy of God and man, agreeably to what was foretold to man in Paradise[x]: in the garden, and upon the cross, he vanquished him[y]; and he has engaged to "bruise him under our feet[z]." Seek then an interest in his death, to ransom you; in his intercession, to preserve you; and in his grace, to strengthen you: so shall you "be more than conquerors through Him that loved you," and shall enjoy the fruits of victory in heaven, when "the deceiver of mankind shall be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone" to receive the due reward of his exertions in everlasting torment[a].]

[s] Ps. lxxxi. 11, 12. Rom. i. 24, 26, 28. Isai. lxvi. 4.
[t] 2 Thess. ii. 11, 12.
[u] Hos. iv. 17. & ix. 12.
[x] Gen. iii. 15.
[y] Matt. iv. 10. Col. ii. 15.
[z] Rom. xvi. 20.
[a] Rev. xx. 10.

CCXLII.

ELIJAH CALLS DOWN FIRE FROM HEAVEN.

2 Kin. i. 11, 12. *Again also he sent unto him another captain of fifty with his fifty: and he answered and said unto him, O man of God, thus hath the king said, Come down quickly. And Elijah answered and said unto them, If I be a man of God, let fire come down from heaven, and consume thee and thy fifty. And the fire of God came down from heaven, and consumed him and his fifty.*

MANY things recorded in the Old Testament appear at first sight to savour of harshness and severity. The utter extirpation of the Canaanites, and the judgments inflicted occasionally on the Israelites themselves, were doubtless such dispensations as we cannot contemplate without feeling that "God is very greatly to be feared." The instance before us is of a very terrific nature; and we may be ready to wonder, how a good man could deliberately call fire from heaven to consume two whole companies of fifty

fifty each, when they had no alternative but to fulfil the orders given them, or be put to death for a violation of them. But, if any thing appear to us inexplicable, it is owing to our ignorance, and not to any inequality in the divine government. As to the conduct of Elijah, we will proceed to shew,

I. How it may be vindicated—

As being "a man of like passions with us," he might err, and did err on some occasions; but in this matter he did nothing that was in any wise unbecoming his high character. Consider,

1. The provocation given—

[This was exceeding great. Ahaziah walked in all the steps of his father Ahab: and this alone was abundantly sufficient to call forth the displeasure of God against him. But he had now been pouring contempt on God in a more than ordinary degree. He had fallen through a lattice, and the injury he had received was likely to prove fatal. Anxious to know what the event would be, he sent messengers to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron. By this conduct he declared, not to Israel only, but even to the heathen themselves, that there was no God in Israel able to solve the question, and that the god of Ekron, a city of the Philistines, was superior to him. What an insult was this to the God of Israel, "Whose name is, Jealous!" And what a tendency had this to confirm the heathen in their idolatry, and to justify them in their rejection of the true God!

Besides this, when Jehovah sent his servant Elijah to reprove the messengers, and to give them the information which they were going to seek, Ahaziah, instead of humbling himself for his offence, and preparing for his latter end, rose up in anger against the God of heaven and earth, and sent a band of soldiers to seize the Prophet, in order to wreak his vengeance on him. He knew that Elijah was a most distinguished prophet of Jehovah, and yet he determined to slay him, for no other reason than because he had delivered the message which God had sent him to deliver. What was this but to contend with God himself?

But further, when the whole band with their commander were consumed by fire from heaven, the enraged king did not at all relent, but sent another, and another band, as though he was determined never to relinquish the unequal contest.

Can we wonder that God should inflict signal vengeance on such a man, and mark the evil of his conduct in the severity of his punishment?]

2. The judgment inflicted—

Fire was sent from heaven to consume the men. But could Elijah

Elijah do this? or was he any other than the mere organ of the Deity, to announce the judgment, and assign the reason of it? When Moses intreated of God to interpose and shew whom he had chosen for his high priest, fire came forth to consume all the competitors of Aaron; or when Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, with all their families, were swallowed up alive in the earth according to the prediction of Moses; was Moses the author of the judgments? The people indeed foolishly complained of him as such, but it is manifest that it was Jehovah alone, and not Moses, that inflicted these punishments on the offending people. So it was with Elijah: he did not even pray for the judgments as one under the influence of revenge, but merely denounced them according to the will of his Divine Master. The terms in which they were denounced are worthy of notice. The captains, in calling him "a man of God," did not mean to honour, but insult him: it was as though they had said, "Thou boastest of Jehovah as thy Master; but we come to thee in the name of a greater king than he: king Ahaziah says, Come down, come down quickly." "Then says Elijah, "If I be a man of God, you shall have a proof of it, and of the greatness of that King whom I obey." He had before desired fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice, and it produced no permanent effect upon them: now therefore he declares from God, that they shall be the sacrifice, and fall a prey to the devouring flames.

What was there here that can in any way reflect upon the character of Elijah? He was but the organ to declare, what a holy and offended God saw just occasion to inflict.

If it be said, that the soldiers themselves acted under the orders of another, we answer, that they could not but know the character of Elijah, who had confounded all the worshippers of Baal; and that they should rather have submitted to have military law executed upon them, than be the instruments of man to fight against God.]

3. The ends for which it was inflicted—

[Almost the whole nation of Israel had rejected God: and all the means which had been used to bring them back to their allegiance to him, had failed. Now they had an evidence which, it might be reasonably hoped, they could not withstand. The information, conveyed by Elijah to the king's messengers, was sufficient to convince both the king and his people, that Elijah's God was omniscient: and, when they still refused to acknowledge him, and rose up in arms against him, the judgment he inflicted was sufficient to convince them that he was omnipotent: and had it produced this salutary effect, the judgment, how severe soever it may appear, would have been an act of mercy. The temporal destruction of a few would have been a merciful expedient for the salvation of a whole people. If it

produced not this happy effect, the fault was not in God, but in them.]

Thus justifiable in every view was this conduct of Elijah. Let us then proceed to shew,

II. How it may be improved—

As the dispensation appears dark, it may be proper to throw some further light upon it: and, when our views of it are rectified, it will afford us some valuable lessons. We will improve the subject therefore,

1. In a way of caution—

[We must not imagine that we are at liberty to act in all things as the Prophets did, or even as our blessed Lord himself did. Their peculiar office gave them an authority, which we are not called to exercise. This thought is of great importance; for, if we do not advert to it, we may think ourselves justified in a line of conduct which is most opposite to the path of duty. The Apostles themselves materially erred in this very way. They supposed that this conduct of Elijah afforded a proper precedent for them; and therefore when the inhabitants of a Samaritan village refused to receive them, they proposed to our Lord, "Wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, even as Elias did?" But our Lord said, "Ye know not what spirit ye are of: for the Son of Man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them[a]." Here our Lord rectifies their apprehensions. They were under the influence of a vindictive spirit, and were wanting to make Jehovah the avenger of their wrongs. But this was very different from the spirit of Elijah, and quite contrary both to the precepts and example of Christ. Christ was injuriously treated by all ranks and orders of men, yet did he never exert his power to destroy his enemies: on the contrary, he sought with invincible patience to convert and save them. On one occasion indeed he did, when an armed band came to apprehend him, strike them all backward with a word[b]: but he only struck them *down;* he did not strike them *dead,* though he could as easily have done the one as the other: his design was to bring this history to their remembrance, and to shew them that they were fighting against God. On other occasions, he wept over the most inveterate of his enemies, and at last laid down his life for them; and, after his resurrection, commanded that the very first offers of salvation should be made to them. This then is the manner in which we are to act. We must never seek to avenge ourselves; but must rather bless them that curse us, and do good to them that despitefully use us, and persecute us. We may indeed heap coals of fire upon their heads; but it must be, to melt them into love[c]. The rule that is universally

[a] Luke ix. 53—56. [b] John xviii. 6. [c] Rom. xii. 20, 21.

universally established for the regulation of our conduct, is this; "Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good."]

2. In a way of instruction—

[Two things only will we notice under this head; namely, *The danger of persecuting the saints of God*; and, *The security of all who trust in God.*

Behold one party slain by fire from heaven; and soon after, another party, of fifty each! What has called forth these signal acts of vengeance? They sought to lay hands on a faithful servant of the Lord. We do not indeed expect that all persecutors will be visited with the like judgments: but we know what God hath spoken respecting them; "He that toucheth you, toucheth the apple of mine eye." We know also what our blessed Saviour has said, "It were better that a millstone were hanged about their necks, and that they were cast into the depths of the sea, than that they should offend one of his little ones." And would it not have been better for those hundred soldiers and their captains to have been thus treated? Verily, if they had been so treated for refusing to persecute a servant of the Lord, we would have congratulated them on the occasion, as martyrs in the cause of God. Or even if they had been so treated on other accounts, still they would at least have not perished under such a load of guilt as now lay upon them. People now make a mock at religion, and turn the very terms in which God designates his people into terms of reproach; and, if they were not restrained by human laws, would proceed to all the cruelties that have been practised in former times: but let it be remembered, that Christ himself is wounded in the person of his saints: as he said once to Saul, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" so now he regards his people's cause as his own, and will surely recompense into the bosoms of their enemies whatsoever shall be said or done against them. "Precious in his sight is the blood of his saints." Remember this, ye who revile and persecute the children of God: they may appear weak, and unable to avenge themselves; but "their Redeemer is mighty," and will in due time execute the fulness of his wrath upon his enemies, precisely as he did in the days of old[d].

On the other hand, he will protect his people, as he did this distinguished prophet. He will be "as a wall of fire round about, and the glory in the midst of them." Most unanswerable is that question, "Who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good?" If God be for them, who can be against them? "Let the weak then say, I am strong:" let them say with David, "Though *an host should encamp against me*, yet shall not my heart be afraid." In the hands of our adorable Lord we are safe, "nor can any pluck us out of them."

We

[d] 2 Chron. xxxvi. 15, 16.

We should not, it is true, court persecution: but if it come for the Lord's sake, we may expect to have "strength given us according to our day," and to be made "more than conquerors through Him that loved us."]

CCXLIII.

ELIJAH'S TRANSLATION TO HEAVEN.

2 Kin. ii. 9—12. *And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me. And he said, Thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken away from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so. And it came to pass, as they still went on and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it; and he cried, My Father, my father! the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof!*

RELIGION, however despised by men, has invariably been honoured by God. He has said, "Them that honour me, I will honour:" and he has fulfilled his word to all his servants in all ages. The tokens of his love and the communications of his grace have in different measures been vouchsafed unto them; and for the most part some visible manifestations of his favour have been given them, in proportion as they have visibly displayed their regard for him. On some occasions the honour conferred upon his servants has been exceeding great. Noah, Abraham, and many others, have been so distinguished by him, as to be set, as it were, above all the rest of the human race that existed in their day: and in two instances, the one before the deluge, and the other since, he has condescended to exempt from death frail mortals like ourselves; and to exalt them in their embodied state to the celestial Paradise. Of Enoch we have spoken formerly: we are now to speak of the other instance, the prophet Elijah—

We propose to consider,

I. The

I. The translation of Elijah—

In order to get a just view of this subject, we must notice,

1. How he was occupied—

[This eminent servant of Jehovah was indefatigable in his Master's work: nor, when informed of God's gracious purpose respecting him, did he relax it, but rather abounded in it more and more.

He laboured for the public good. There were schools of the Prophets, which he had established for the preservation of true religion (amidst the general defection to idolatry,) in the land of Israel. These he visited at Gilgal, at Beth-el, and at Jericho, to strengthen and encourage all the students previous to his final departure from them——— How blessed, how suitable an employment! Thus did Paul go about "confirming the churches," and exert himself with all fidelity for the good of the Ephesian church, when he knew that they were about to "see his face no more[a]." Thus did Peter also, when he knew that his departure was at hand[b]: and thus did our blessed Lord himself just previous to his crucifixion. What encouraging discourses were those which he delivered to his Disciples[c]: and how wonderfully sublime his parting prayer[d]! Thus too should every servant of God exert himself as long as his Divine Master shall see fit to continue him on earth. To train up others for the same glorious service is the most acceptable office he can perform for God, and the most profitable work he can execute for man.

Nor was the Prophet inattentive to the welfare of his private friends. "What shall I do for thee before I go?" was the question which he put to his servant Elisha. He knew that after his departure he could benefit his friends no longer; and therefore he would improve the present moment to the utmost of his power. How worthy of his high character was such conduct as this! How carefully should every Minister, yea and every private Christian, put to himself this question, "What more can I do, for my country? for my friends? for my very enemies? What can I do as a parent, for my children? as a master, for my family? as a friend, for my most endeared companions? as a Minister, for the people committed to my charge? Is there no one who particularly needs from me a word of reproof, of consolation, of encouragement?"

The Lord grant that at whatever hour we shall be called hence, we may be found thus labouring in the way most suited to our respective spheres, and our several capacities!]

2. How he was removed—

["A fiery chariot and horses of fire," that is, angels under that

[a] Acts xx. 17—38. [b] 2 Pet. i. 12—15.
[c] John 14th, 15th, & 16th chapters. [d] John, 17th chapter.

that appearance, were sent to convey him to heaven, without his ever tasting the bitterness of death. What a blessed change did he then experience! ——— But such is indeed the change which every saint experiences at his departure hence. The body, it is true, must die, and be consigned to the grave; but the soul shall be carried by angels into Abraham's bosom: and the body itself, after returning to its native dust, shall at the last day be re-united to the soul, and enjoy all that Elijah now enjoys, in the presence of its God ——— This was by the exaltation of Elijah assured to men; for the honour conferred on him was not that he alone should have a glorified body, but that he should possess it now, whilst others must wait for it till the resurrection of the just.]

We cannot wonder that the removal of such a man should call forth,

II. The lamentation of Elisha—

So deep and unfeigned was his grief, that he rent his clothes as the accustomed expression of it. He lamented the departure of Elijah,

1. As a private loss—

["My father, my father!" cried this afflicted saint. He regarded the departed Prophet with all the reverence and affection due to a beloved parent. Indeed the Prophet was his *spiritual* father; for it was by him that Elisha was first called to the service of his God: and to such there is an affection due, as much as to a *natural* parent: for to our natural parent we owe the existence of our bodies only; but to our spiritual parent, the salvation of our souls[e]. And how great is the loss of one who has opened our eyes to eternal things, and by his watchful care and salutary advice has led us forward toward the possession of everlasting bliss!

It might have seemed indeed, that, as Elisha expected to receive the benefit he had asked, he needed not to have laid so much to heart the loss he had sustained: but no considerations of personal benefit ought to divest us of the finer feelings of our nature. The benefit, it is true, was exceeding great: he had asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit; that is, (regarding Elijah as his father,) *he desired to have the portion of his eldest son, which was double that of the younger children*[f]: but still he had been ungrateful in the extreme, if he had not bewailed the loss of so faithful a master, and so dear a friend.]

2. As a public loss—

[Horses and chariots composed the chief strength of armies in

[e] Philem. 19.

[f] Deut. xxi. 17. with Numb. xi. 17, 25. As for his asking for twice as much as Elijah himself possessed, and actually doing by virtue of it twice as much good as Elijah did, it is all fanciful and absurd.

in that day: hence Elisha, judging that now the best friend and most efficient protector of his country was gone, exclaims, "The chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof!" And true indeed it is, that the faithful servants of God do deserve the character here given them. Look at Moses, and see how often he preserved the whole nation of Israel from ruin. Had there been ten pious men found in Sodom, all the cities of the plain should have been spared for their sake. Little do the world imagine how much they are indebted to the very men whom they revile and persecute: but God has declared that even one single individual who humbly intercedes for his country, may be the means of preserving it from utter destruction[g]. Well then may such persons be honoured while they live, and deeply deplored when removed to a better world.]

ADDRESS—

1. Those who are more advanced in life—

[The time is shortly coming when you must be taken into the presence of your God. Should you not then inquire, Whether "the good work be yet begun in you; or, if begun, whether it be proceeding towards its perfect accomplishment?" Should you not ask, What is there more that I can do for God, my neighbour, or myself? O "work while it is day, because the night cometh wherein no man can work." "There is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave whither ye go;" and therefore "whatever your hand findeth to do, ye should do it with all your might."

To Ministers who are drawing near the close of their labours, this subject applies itself with peculiar force. If you see young Elishas coming forward to enter into your labours, be thankful for it; and labour, whilst yet an opportunity is afforded you, to raise up a succession of faithful Ministers, who shall continue after your decease to advance the Redeemer's interests in the world.]

2. To those who are entering into life—

[Learn of Elisha to appreciate rightly the privileges you enjoy. The world will often endeavour to draw you from Christ and his faithful servants; and will say, "Tarry here, I pray thee:" but let your answer always be, "As the Lord liveth, I will not leave either my God himself, or the ministry of his word:" in all places, and under all circumstances, I will "cleave unto my Lord with full purpose of heart." "If you have the light, then believe in the light, and walk in it, that ye may be the children of the light." Above all, take care that your eye be single, and that spiritual blessings have their due preponderance in your hearts. If God should say to you, as in truth he

[g] Jer. v. 1. Ezek. xxii. 30.

he does, What shall I do for thee[g]? then let your soul be ever ready to reply, "Grant that a double portion of thy Spirit be given to me." Yes; let spiritual blessings be the one object of your desires; and "covet earnestly the best gifts."]

[g] John xiv. 13, 14.

CCXLIV.

ELIJAH'S GOD.

2 Kin. ii. 14. *Where is the Lord God of Elijah?*

WHEN bereft of those whom we love, and with whose continuance in the world our welfare was intimately connected, we are ready to think that our *all* is gone. We forget that, while Jehovah liveth, he can repair our breaches, and make up to us all our losses. When Elijah was taken up into heaven, Elisha cried, "My father, my father! the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof!" He supposed that Israel's defence was utterly departed from them. But he soon found, that God had mercy in store for Israel; and that the Spirit of the departed Prophet now rested upon *him*. Recovering therefore from his desponding fears, he took up the mantle which had fallen from Elijah, and, in full expectation of seeing the waters of Jordan separated by means of it, as they had just before been, he smote them with it, and said, "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?"

From these words we shall take occasion to shew,

I. By what means God shewed himself to be the God of Elijah—

The whole history of Elijah might be adduced to illustrate this point: but, to avoid needless prolixity, we observe, that God shewed himself to be his God,

1. By the communications of his grace—

[Elijah was eminently endued with grace: he was *pious in the midst of a general defection*; he was *courageous under the most cruel persecution*. The whole nation of Israel were become idolaters: but he dared to stem the torrent of iniquity, and to confess Jehovah as his God. There were indeed seven thousand persons who had not conformed to the worship of Baal; but as they were totally unknown to him, the effect, as far as it related to

to him, was the same as if there had not been one; because he derived no comfort from their countenance or example. But he was not contented to do what was right himself, without bearing his testimony against what was wrong. He therefore reproved with boldness and severity the king himself: and though on one occasion his courage seemed to fail him[a], yet on the whole he was an undaunted champion for his God, and an invincible sufferer for the truth's sake.

As for the spirit of prophecy which he had, or his power to work miracles, these were no proofs that God was his God; for then God must have been the God of Balaam, who was a prophet; and of Judas, who wrought miracles. But the graces which he exercised and maintained in the midst of a wicked generation, incontestibly shewed, that he was elevated in God's esteem far above the generality of mankind.]

2. By the interpositions of his providence—

[Such was his interest with God, that by his prayers he shut up the heavens for three years and an half, and then opened them again by the same means[b]. When he lifted up his voice to God, instantly came fire from heaven to consume his sacrifice[c]; yea, to consume also, and that repeatedly, the enemies who were sent to apprehend him[d]. While all the surrounding nations, together with Israel, groaned under the calamitous effects of a drought, he was miraculously sustained with bread and meat, twice a day for a long time together, by ravens at the side of the brook Cherith[e]. When that brook failed, he was supported by a poor widow, whose barrel of meal never decreased, nor did her cruse of oil fail, till a return of rain brought plenty to the famished land[f]. On another occasion (when perhaps he could least of all expect such an interposition) an angel was sent to feed him[g]; and on taking a second meal of the food provided, he was enabled to go in the strength of it for forty days. Waving all mention of visions imparted to him[h], or miracles wrought by him[i], let us pass on to the period of his departure from the world. Then we see not only the sting of death taken away, but the law relating to the dissolution of our bodies cancelled; and the man of God taken in body and soul into heaven without ever tasting of death[k]; the only person thus honoured in the new world, as Enoch had been in the old world. Can we doubt but that the person for whom God so interposed both in life and in death, was a distinguished favourite of heaven?]

Yet were not these favours from God so peculiar, but,

II. That

[a] 1 Kin. xix. 3. [b] Jam. v. 17, 18. [c] 1 Kin. xviii. 37, 38.
[d] 2 Kin. i. 10—12. [e] 1 Kin. xvii. 3—6. [f] ib. ver. 9—16.
[g] 1 Kin. xix. 4—8. [h] ib. ver. 11, 12.
[i] 1 Kin. xvii. 19—23. & 2 Kin. ii. 8. [k] ib. ver. 11.

II. That Believers at this time may expect similar tokens of his regard—

We readily grant, that no one at this day is warranted to expect a miracle; but yet every Believer,

1. Shall have God for *his* God—

[God has been the God of his people in every age. He is called, "The Lord God of Shem[l]:" and it is needless to say how often he is spoken of as "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." That this honour was not confined to a few eminent saints, is manifest; for he is called by no name more frequently than "The God of Israel." Indeed he has expressly covenanted that he "will be *the God of* his believing people[m]," or, as that term is varied and explained in the Epistle to the Hebrews[n], He "will be *a God unto* them," and do every thing that an almighty Being can do for their benefit. As "he was not ashamed to be called the God of his people" of old[o], so neither will he be ashamed to be called *our* God.]

2. Shall have all the proofs of it that can conduce to his welfare—

[Think of any thing that a Believer can need, for body or for soul, for time or for eternity; and we do not hesitate to affirm, that God has made it the subject of a special promise, and that it is the Believer's privilege to expect it at his hands. Do we need temporal blessings? God has said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all other things shall be added unto you[p]." Are our privations accompanied also with great dangers? "Our place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks; bread shall be given us, and our water shall be sure[q]." Do we desire that our petitions may be heard? We are reminded that "Elijah was a man of like passions with us;" and are taught to conclude from the answer given to his prayers, that "the prayer of every righteous man availeth much[r]." Do we need to be strengthened for our manifold trials and conflicts? "His grace shall be sufficient for us[s];" and "as our day is, so shall also our strength be[t]." True, we shall not be exempt from death, or carried in a fiery chariot up to heaven: but the sting of death shall be taken away; and we shall be "carried by angels into Abraham's bosom[u]." In a word, if only we seek God as our God in Christ, "he will give us grace and glory, and withhold no good thing from us" either in time or eternity[x].

What

[l] Gen. ix. 26. [m] Jer. xxxi. 33.
[n] Heb. viii. 10. See also 1 Chron. xvii. 24.
[o] Heb. xi. 16. [p] Matt. vi. 33.
[q] Compare Isai. xxxiii. 16. with notes [d] and [e].
[r] Jam. v. 16—18. [s] 2 Cor. xii. 9. [t] Deut. xxxiii. 25.
[u] Luke xvi. 22. [x] Ps. lxxxiv. 11.

What then had Elijah more than this, or what can we desire more?]

Having proved our point, we come to RECOMMEND the confident expectation expressed in the text—

[Believer, art thou just called forth, like Elisha, to face a frowning world? Fear not: take up Elijah's mantle, and smite the waters that obstruct thy path, and expect Elijah's God to open thy way before thee. Think "not any thing too hard for God." Remember that he is thy God, as well as Elijah's: and as "his ear is not heavy, that he cannot hear; so neither is is his hand shortened, that he cannot save[y]." See what confident expectation was manifested by God's Church of old: "Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake as in the antient days, in the generations of old! Art thou not it which hath dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep; *that hath made the depths of the sea a way for the ransomed to pass over*[z]?" Thus must you call upon your God. You cannot ask too largely, nor expect too much at his hands. If difficulties are to be surmounted, or wants to be supplied, or lusts to be subdued, go forth and say, "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?"

Even to Unbelievers methinks this subject is not without its appropriate use: for, who was Elijah more than others? Was not he once "a child of wrath even as others?" and may not those who are now children of wrath, become even as he? Yes, there is a cloud of witnesses to prove, that, though Elijah is gone, Elijah's God remaineth, and that he is the same gracious, merciful, loving, and almighty Friend as ever. O seek him then as your reconciled God in Christ; and you shall soon be able to say, "He is *my* God, and I will praise him; my father's God, and I will exalt him[a]."]

[y] Isai. lix. 1. [z] Isai. li. 9, 10. [a] Exod. xv. 2.

CCXLV.

ELISHA MOCKED BY THE CHILDREN.

2 Kin. ii. 23, 24. *And he went up from thence unto Beth-el: and, as he was going up by the way, there came forth little children out of the city, and mocked him, and said unto him, Go up, thou bald head; go up, thou bald head. And he turned back, and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the Lord. And there came forth two she-bears out of the wood, and tare forty and two children of them.*

THOUGH

THOUGH the ministry of the word in its original purpose was intended only for the happiness of man, it but too frequently proves an occasion of his more aggravated misery. That great Prophet, the Lord Jesus Christ, who came to enlighten and save the world, was "set no less for the fall, than for the rising, of many in Israel." In like manner St. Paul was to some "a savour of life unto life; but to others, a savour of death unto death." Thus the prophet Elisha, who, in healing the waters of Jericho, not only conferred upon Israel a great temporal benefit, but shewed what benefit he was sent, to confer on their souls also, was speedily constrained to call down judgments upon the people whose welfare he was most anxious to promote.

The destruction of so many children for what appears to have been but a small offence, has afforded to infidels an occasion of triumph. But that this dispensation affords no just ground of complaint either against the God of Israel or his holy Prophet, will appear, if we consider,

I. The sin committed by the children—

In their treatment of the Prophet we behold a mixture,

1. Of contumely—

[The name of "bald head" was not, it is true, any bitter invective; but it was intended as a reproach; and the evil of such reproaches consists, not in the term that is used, but in the intent of him that uses it. Opprobrious language used to any one is sinful[a]; but as used on this occasion, it was an insult to God himself. The mocking of a poor man on account of his poverty is considered by God as a reproach offered to himself, who has appointed him his lot[b]: much more therefore was this contemptuous treatment of the Prophet an insult to that God, who had called him to the prophetic office. This is plainly declared by our blessed Lord[c]; and it is confirmed by a similar testimony from the apostle Paul[d].]

2. Of profaneness—

[The expression "Go up, go up," evidently refers to the recent exaltation of Elijah in the fiery chariot: and it intimated, that his translation was regarded by them either as *a fiction to be disbelieved*, or *an event to be despised*. In either of these views, their

[a] Matt. v. 22. [b] Prov. xvii. 5. [c] Luke x. 16. [d] 1 Thess. iv. 8.

their guilt was exceeding great: for how could they disbelieve what was immediately attested by that stupendous miracle, the forming a dry passage through Jordan by a stroke of Elijah's mantle? It is true, that many of the people of Jericho doubted at the time, and desired Elisha to send fifty men to search for his master, lest he should have been cast upon some mountain or valley: but that very doubt, like the unbelief of Thomas, tended only to confirm the fact that had been denied: and consequently the continuance of unbelief became so much the more criminal, in proportion as the evidence had been given to confirm the fact.

But it is probable that the fact, though believed, was deemed a fit subject for ridicule; "Let us see thee, O thou bald head, go up," as thy master did. Thus the very abundance of God's power and grace was turned into an occasion of profane banter. And, strange as it may seem, this is a very common source of ridicule among the ungodly world. Goodness in itself is not made a ground of contempt; but as proceeding from God, as illustrating his perfections, and as conducing to his glory, it is an object of general derision. What terms, for instance, are more frequently used as expressive of contempt than "the elect," "the saints," and such like? And why are they so used, but because the sovereignty and the holiness of God are implied in them? Such reproaches then most assuredly strike at God himself, who estimates them by a very different standard from that which we use: we view them as a facetious exposure of folly; but he views them as an impious contempt of the Lord our God.]

We have a clear proof of the malignity of the offence in God's sight, from,

II. The judgment inflicted on account of it—

In a two-fold light must that judgment be regarded;

1. As a punishment to them—

[We must not suppose that the judgment was inflicted by Elisha; or that he was actuated by a vindictive spirit in denouncing it. He was no more able to inflict it, than Moses was to send the ten plagues of Egypt, or than Elijah was to bring fire from heaven to consume the bands who came to apprehend him: nor was he any more under the influence of revenge, than Peter was when he passed sentence of death on Ananias and Sapphira; or than Paul was when he declared that Elymas, the sorcerer, should be struck blind. He was merely an organ whereby the Deity denounced his curse against them: and the she-bears out of the wood, like the whole creation, animate and inanimate, were ready to execute the vengeance of God upon them. As the locusts and frogs came up over Egypt at God's command, or the lion

lion came forth to slay the disobedient Prophet, or "the winds and storms fulfilled his will" in arresting Jonah in his flight; so these bears received their commission from God, and executed his commands.

Now this punishment was strictly just: for, what greater dishonour could be done to the God of heaven and earth than to make the most stupendous efforts of his goodness a subject of reproach? As it respected the parents, they deserved to lose those children which they had trained up in such impious habits; and the children deserved to be cut off from all further enjoyment of the privileges which they so despised. Even for the transgressions of their parents they might well have suffered, even as the children of Sodom and Gomorrha did: but their own iniquities richly merited the displeasure they experienced[e].]

2. As a lesson to the world—

[Truly in this dispensation were many valuable lessons contained.

It shewed *that smaller acts of persecution, as well as greater, will be noticed by God.* It might be thought a light matter to revile a servant of God; but did God account it so in the instance of Ishmael? He "mocked Isaac," as professing himself to be the child of promise, and the heir of Canaan: and for that sin both he and his mother were cast out from the house of Abraham[f]. This conduct of his is by St. Paul expressly called *persecution*, and is set forth as illustrative of the way in which carnal men still persecute the children of God, and of the everlasting exclusion from heaven which they shall suffer for their impiety[g]. St. Jude also, having declared that there will be "mockers" in the Church, tells us what fearful ruin they must expect from the hands of an angry God[h]. To all therefore who are disposed to deride either religion itself or those who profess it, we would say with the Prophet, "Be ye not mockers, lest your bands be made strong[i]."

Another lesson which this judgment teaches us is, *that young persons, as well as adults, are objects of just retribution.* We readily acknowledge that the criminality of our actions is deep, in proportion as our light is clear, and our judgment matured. But we must not on that account imagine that God will take no notice of the evils committed by young persons: we have here an awful instance to the contrary. We are told in Scripture, that a young person who shall despise his earthly parents, shall be visited with some heavy calamity[k]: and shall God be so careful of the honour of earthly parents, and not be jealous of his own? Shall young people insult *him* with impunity? O let not young people suppose that their youth is any excuse for their misconduct: for if they are old enough to know what is right, they

[e] 2 Chron. xxxvi. 16. [f] Gen. xxi. 9. [g] Gal. iv. 29, 30.
[h] Jude 15, 18. [i] Isai. xxxiii. 22. [k] Prov. xxx. 17.

they are old enough to do it: and "to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin[l]." On the other hand, if they will employ their tongues in praising and magnifying their Redeemer, they shall receive from him a rich recompence of reward[m].

The last lesson we shall notice as arising from this dispensation is, *that parents and children have a fearful responsibility for their conduct towards each other.* Doubtless it sometimes happens that the most pious parents have children whom they cannot prevail upon to serve the Lord: and, if they have laboured faithfully for their good, they shall not be held responsible for their faults. But wicked parents can expect nothing but that their children shall tread in their steps: and the truth is, that young children are for the most part only an echo of their parents' sentiments. What a shocking reflection then will it be to parents, that their children perished through their neglect; or to children, that they persisted in wickedness in opposition to the instructions, example, and intreaties of their parents! Parents, think how you will bear to look upon your children in the future world; and how they will one day execrate your conduct towards them, and call for vengeance on your heads for neglecting to warn them of their evil ways! And, children, think how, if you have disobeyed the voice of your parents, you will execrate your own folly, when you see an impassable gulf between them and you! Reflect a moment on the terror that seized the children the very instant the bears rushed forth upon them; and the distress which came upon their parents when they heard of the calamity that had befallen them. This may serve as an image, though a very faint image, of the terror and distress in which negligent parents and ungodly children will be involved to all eternity. The Lord grant that this may prove a salutary warning to us all!]

[l] Jam. iv. 17. [m] Matt. xxi. 15, 16.

CCXLVI.

THE KING OF MOAB SACRIFICES HIS SON.

2 Kings iii. 27. *Then he took his eldest son, that should have reigned in his stead, and offered him for a burnt-offering upon the wall.*

GOD delights to honour prayer; and often withholds the blessings which he has purposed to bestow, till he shall have been "inquired of by us concerning them[a]." In the preceding context we are informed that

[a] Ezek. xxxvi. 37.

that Moab had rebelled against Israel, and that the kings of Israel, of Judah, and of Edom united their forces in order to reduce them to their former state of subjection. In prosecution of this purpose they were left of God to adopt such measures as nearly proved fatal to the confederate armies. They attempted to pass through the wilderness of Edom, where they were in danger of perishing for want of water. Then, but not till then, did they think of making their application to Jehovah. Jehosaphat, a pious king, proposed it, and the other two from the pressure of their necessity united in it. Elisha, doubtless by the gracious appointment of Providence, was in the camp at the time; and at the request of the three kings, undertook to lay their case before the Lord. The Lord bade him inform them that he would not only give them a miraculous supply of water, but would deliver the Moabites into their hands. The supply of water, without the intervention of any natural cause, was given; and the Moabites mistaking the reflection of the sun upon the water for blood, supposed that the confederate armies had destroyed each other; and going therefore securely to take the spoil, were themselves destroyed. The remnant of them with their king taking refuge in a fortress, the king brought forth his eldest son, and offered him for a burnt-offering in the sight of all his enemies. We shall,

I. Inquire into the reasons of this extraordinary act—

Reduced to the greatest extremity, he resorted to this expedient,

1. To propitiate his gods—

[The gods of the heathen are supposed to delight in sacrifices, and to regard them in proportion to the worth and estimation of them in the minds of the offerers. Hence they are supposed above all to be pleased with human sacrifices: and hence their votaries have offered to them even their own sons and daughters, with the hope of conciliating their favour. Even the Israelites themselves, when they had departed from their God, practised these impious and cruel rites[b]. The king of Moab, now looking to his gods for help, presented to them as an offering his

[b] Ps. cvi. 37, 38.

his own, his eldest son, as being confessedly of more value, and dearer to himself, than all that he possessed. Whilst we lament that Satan should have ever so blinded the eyes of men, we cannot but be filled with shame when we reflect, how little we have ever sacrificed to our offended God. We all know that he has abundant reason to be displeased with us: and we know that "a broken and contrite spirit is a sacrifice which he will never despise:" but how few of us are willing to offer it! how few are at all anxious about his favour, or will exercise any self-denial in order to obtain it! Will not that ignorant heathen rise up in judgment against us? ———]

2 To intimidate his enemies—.

[He offered his son "upon the wall" in the sight of all his enemies. What an idea did that give them of his determination to sacrifice every thing rather than surrender to his enemies, and to sell his life as dear as possible! We cannot doubt but that this act of his was publickly known amongst the besiegers as well as the besieged: and, methinks, it must strike them all with horror to reflect, that they had driven him to such an awful act of desperation; and no doubt it tended also to inflame the hatred of his own subjects against them to the uttermost. We are told indeed that this effect ensued; for "they had great indignation against Israel; who being the Principals in the war, (whilst the other *two* kings were only allies,) were the more immediate objects of their resentment[c]. And certainly the expedient so far succeeded, that his victorious enemies "departed from him, and returned to their own land."]

Having seen the reasons of that extraordinary act, we proceed to,

II. Suggest some reflections naturally arising from it—

We observe then,

1. How great are the calamities of war!

[Dreadful indeed were the evils inflicted on the land of Moab: "the cities were beaten down; every good piece of land was marred with stones; the wells were all filled up; and every good tree levelled with the ground." True it is that these judgments were

[c] The burning of Moscow by the Russians, to prevent it from being serviceable to their enemies, was an act somewhat similar, and tended not a little to convince the French that the complete conquest of Russia would be no easy matter. In fact, it produced the same effect as the expedient of the king of Moab did; it caused his enemies to depart, without pursuing any further the advantages they had already gained.

were inflicted by the command of God; and therefore the agents who inflicted them were blameless: but the warfare which has so long desolated Europe, and especially that which has recently been carried on in its more northern states, has partaken much of the same spirit, and proved almost equally fatal to the happiness of millions. What reason then have we to bless our God, that, notwithstanding all the menaces of our enemies, this happy land has not been made the theatre of war! And with what alacrity should we contribute for the relief and comfort of our suffering allies! —— Let us learn to sympathize even with our enemies, and to moderate our joy at the victories we obtain, by feelings of compassion for the miseries we inflict.]

2. How pitiable is the ignorance of the heathen!

[Who can forbear to pity that afflicted king, who had recourse to such an unnatural expedient as that of murdering his own son in order to pacify the deities he adored? Yet such are the methods by which the heathen almost universally endeavour to appease their gods. When once they begin to ask, "Wherewith shall I come before my god?" they proceed to say, "Shall I give my first-born for my transgression; the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul[d]?" Even amongst our fellow-subjects in India, there are thousands, perhaps many thousands, sacrificed every year, under the idea that such offerings are pleasing to the gods whom they worship. Should we hear of such transactions then with indifference? Should not a holy zeal be stirred up within us, to turn the heathen, if possible, from those vanities, to serve the living and true God? O that we felt for the honour of God, and for the good of man, as we ought to do; and that they especially who call themselves Ministers of Christ were more willing to spend and be spent in the service of their Lord! Alas! how few are those that are willing to forego their carnal ease and worldly interests, to save their benighted and perishing fellow-creatures! A call to accept a lucrative situation is soon acknowledged and easily obeyed: but God may call us long enough to go and labour among the heathen, and we neither regard his voice, nor listen to his proposals. If ever there was a time that peculiarly called for Missionary exertions, methinks this is that time: for never was there such a zeal for disseminating the holy Scriptures as at this time; never were so many Societies raised up to consider the state both of Jews and Gentiles, as at this moment. This alone is a call from God to contribute, each according to his ability, to the advancement of our Redeemer's kingdom, and to the salvation of a ruined world.]

3. How rich are the provisions of the Gospel!

[We all, as sinners, have reason to fear, that God is displeased with us. But we need not sacrifice an eldest son to avert his

[d] Mic. vi. 7.

his wrath: no: blessed be his name! he himself has given us "a Lamb for a burnt-offering," even his only dear Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. This sacrifice was once offered on Mount Calvary; and it was offered, not to intimidate, but encourage us; not to menace us with ruin, but to open for us a way of everlasting salvation. With this sacrifice he was well pleased: he smelled a sweet savour at the very instant it was offered; and from respect to it he is reconciled to his most inveterate enemies. What thanks do we owe to God for such a wonderful provision as this! How delightful should it be to us to hear, that "God spared not his own Son, but delivered HIM up for us all!" Let us dwell upon the joyful sound: let us put away all those vain hopes which we are apt to substitute in the place of this: and let us look to Christ for all the ends and purposes for which he was sent. *Are we afraid that God is angry with us?* let us seek reconciliation with him through the blood of our adorable Redeemer. *Are we desirous of repelling all our spiritual enemies?* Let us "be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might:" let us "resist the devil" in the strength of Christ, and "he will flee from us." In Christ there is all that we can stand in need of. We are expressly taught to say, "In the Lord have I righteousness and strength." "In him therefore let us rejoice alway;" for, as "in him we shall be justified, so in him we should glory[e]."]

[e] Isai. xlv. 24, 25.

CCXLVII.

ALL THE DISPENSATIONS OF PROVIDENCE ARE GOOD.

2 Kin. iv. 26. *And she answered, It is well.*

TO serve the Lord with our talents is the best possible improvement of them. Even as it respects this life, we never exert ourselves truly for God without receiving from him, in some way or other, an abundant recompence. Behold the pious Shunamite: being provided richly with the good things of this life, she gladly imparted of them to the prophet Elisha; and, with her husband's approbation, provided for him a comfortable accommodation in her house. The Prophet, full of gratitude, desired to requite her kindness, and for that end would have exerted his influence with the king in any way that she should desire: but her contented disposition rendered

rendered all such services unnecessary. There was, however, one service which he might render. She had no child, which to a Jewish woman was a great calamity: and he might intercede with God to bestow upon her this blessing. Accordingly he did so, and prevailed: and thus her generous hospitality was richly rewarded. But she had a still better reward in her soul: for under an exceedingly deep affliction, she was enabled to make the declaration in our text, "It is well."

In considering this declaration, we shall notice,

I. The circumstances under which it was made—

This son had no sooner arrived at an age to render himself amusing to his parents, than he was removed by sudden death. In great affliction the mother set off instantly to the Prophet; who, seeing her at a distance, sent immediately to inquire after the welfare of herself, her husband, and her child: and to each inquiry she replied, "It is well." Behold here,

1. Her resignation—

[Her affliction would have been great, if she had had other children left: but to lose her only son, her son miraculously given, and to have him so suddenly snatched away, was a calamity which might have utterly overwhelmed her. That she felt deeply was manifest, from the manner in which she prostrated herself at the Prophet's feet, and from the plea she urged with him to intercede in her behalf: "Did I desire a son of my lord? Did I not say, Do not deceive me?" that is, If I had indulged an inordinate desire after this blessing, I might well have expected this severe chastisement: but when it was given me unsolicited, as a reward for my attentions to thee, surely it was not given merely to mock me, and to augment my sorrows. But, notwithstanding the anguish of her mind, she was enabled to leave the matter in God's hands, and to say, "It is well." Thus did she tread in the steps of Aaron[a], of Eli[b], of David[c], and of Job[d]; and afforded an example of patience to the Church in all ages.]

2. Her faith—

[She had not indeed any promise to rest upon; but she had a persuasion that God was gracious, and would hear the prayers of his servant in her behalf. Hence it was that she put the child upon the Prophet's bed, and hastened with such speed to him,

[a] Lev. x. 3. [b] 1 Sam. iii. 18. [c] Ps. xxxix. 9. [d] Job i. 21.

him, and pleaded her cause with him in such an affecting manner. In this view the history before us is referred to in the Epistle to the Hebrews; "By faith women received their dead raised to life again[e]:" and in this noble exercise of faith, she approved herself a true daughter of Abraham, who offered up his son Isaac, from a persuasion "that God was able to raise him up again, even from the dead[f]." This divine principle calmed her spirits and composed her mind: and, wherever the same principle exists, it will produce a similar composure, in proportion as its operation is encouraged and felt.]

Her declaration was scarcely more the language of faith than it was of prophecy; as appears from,

II. The events whereby it was verified—

The Prophet instantly complied with her request, and sent his servant Gehazi to lay his staff upon the face of the child, with a view to his recovery. But in this he appears to have acted without any direction from God, and without that humble reference to God which the occasion demanded: and therefore God rebuked him by not accompanying the attempt with his blessing. The Prophet, finding that his desire had failed, sought the Lord with all humility and earnestness; and, by means similar to those which had before been successfully used by Elijah, he obtained of God the restoration of the child to life[g]. Who now must not acknowledge the truth of the mother's declaration? Verily, "it was well," and the dispensation though afflictive, was good,

1. As exercising and confirming her graces—

[How would it have been known that she possessed the graces of faith and resignation, if somewhat had not occurred to call them forth? and how could they have been strengthened if not exercised? The pruning of the vine is therefore good, because it tends to augment its fruitfulness[h]; and the putting of the choicest vessel into a furnace is good, as tending to fit it for the master's use[i]. Thus is "tribulation good, as working patience, experience, and hope[k]." Hence we are authorized rather to congratulate the saints upon their trials, than condole with them[l]: and

[e] Heb. xi. 35. [f] ib. ver. 17—19.

[g] Compare ver. 34, 35. with 1 Kin. xvii. 21. The gestures were used, not as means to an end, but as emblematic of the blessing desired. [h] John xv. 2. [i] 2 Tim. ii. 21.

[k] Rom. v. 3—5. Heb. xii. 11.

[l] Jam. i. 2, 3. & v. 11. Rom. viii. 28.

and the universal testimony of God's people, after they have come out of their troubles, accords with that of the Psalmist, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted[m]."]

2. As displaying and magnifying God's perfections—

[This trial of hers occasioned an application to God in her behalf: and how marvellous did the condescension of God appear in listening to the voice of his servant, and in granting his petitions! How glorious too was the display of his *power!* And was not a momentary suffering good, when it was an occasion of bringing so much glory to Jehovah? Is there a saint in the universe that would not gladly endure even more than that, for the attainment of so blessed an end? St. Paul desired nothing so much as that God might be glorified in him; and, provided his Lord and "Saviour might only be magnified in his body," he was indifferent whether it were "by life or by death[n]." And, wherever the love of God is shed abroad in the heart, not even life itself will be dear to us, except as it may be improved, or sacrificed for him.]

ADVICE—

1. Be not hasty to judge the dispensations of Providence—

[God's ways are in the great deep; his footsteps are not known: and often those very dispensations, of which we are ready to say with Jacob, "All these things are against me," are in reality the greatest blessings that God can bestow. Behold the case of Job; how glorious was the issue of his trials[o]! And, if we could see the end from the beginning as God does, we should pronounce a similar verdict on every trial that we are called to endure. The forty years sojourning in the wilderness was a dark dispensation; yet we are told, "God led his people in the *right* way;" so he leads us also in the *right* way; and when we get to heaven we shall bless him as fervently for all the troubles we sustained, as for any comfort we ever enjoyed.]

2. Be not backward to improve them—

[Every trial has a voice to us, and is calculated to teach us some important lesson[p]. Hence the Prophet says, "Hear the rod, and him that appointed it[q]." Consider then what it is intended to speak to you: take occasion from it to examine your ways, to see wherein you may have erred, or wherein you may amend your ways. Thus will every event be made a blessing to your souls; and Samson's riddle be verified in you; "Out of the eater you will bring forth meat, and out of the strong you will bring forth sweet."]

[m] Ps. cxix. 67, 71. [n] Phil. i. 20. [o] Job xlii. 11—16.
[p] Job xxxiii. 14—17, 29, 30. [q] Mic. vi. 9.

CCXLVIII.

NAAMAN HEALED OF HIS LEPROSY.

2 Kin. v. 13. *And his servants came near, and spake unto him, and said, My father, if the Prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash, and be clean?*

MEN universally claim a right to "do what they will with their own;" but they are extremely averse to concede that right to God. Indeed there is scarcely any doctrine against which the carnal heart rises with such acrimony, as against the sovereignty of God. Nevertheless we must maintain that the Governor of the universe ordereth every thing after the counsel of his own will, and dispenseth his gifts "according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself." He once chose the Jews for his peculiar people, not for the sake of any righteousness of theirs, but because he has ordained that he would magnify his grace in them: and for the same reason has he now transferred his favours to the Gentiles. Our Lord, in his first sermon at Nazareth, warned his hearers, that, if they rejected his gracious overtures, the blessings of his Gospel should be transferred to the Gentile world: and, to shew them how futile all their objections were, and how delusive their hopes of impunity in sin, he reminded them, that God had in many instances vouchsafed mercy to Gentiles, not only in conjunction with his people, but even in opposition to them: for that there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha; but them had God overlooked, whilst he shewed mercy to Naaman the Syrian[a].

The history to which our Lord referred, is that which is contained in the chapter before us: which we propose to consider,

I. In a way of literal interpretation—

Under the pressure of a leprosy, which was an incurable disorder, Naaman, the Syrian, applied to Elisha

[a] Luke iv. 27.

Elisha for a cure. Doubtless every thing that the Syrian physicians could devise had been tried, but to no purpose. It happened however than an Israelitish maid, whom the Syrians had taken captive, was living in the service of Naaman; and that she, knowing what great miracles had been wrought by Elisha, suggested, that by an application to him her master might be restored to health. The idea being suggested to Naaman, he determined without delay to apply for a cure. This he did erroneously at first to the king of Israel; but afterwards to Elisha himself: but through his own folly and wickedness he nearly lost the benefit which he was so eager to obtain: for, instead of following the direction given him by the Prophet, "he turned, and went away in a rage[b]." Here let us pause to inquire, what it was that so nearly robbed him of the desired blessing? It was,

1. His offended pride—

[He had come in great state, and with rich rewards in his hand, to the house of a poor Prophet: and the Prophet had not deigned to come out to him, but had only sent him word what he must do in order to a cure. This was considered by Naaman as an insufferable insult. In his own country he was regarded with the utmost deference; and was he now to be treated with such indignity by a contemptible Israelite? No: he would not listen for a moment to a message sent him in so rude a way.

Alas! what an enemy to human happiness is pride! How acute are its feelings! how hasty its judgment! how impetuous its actings! But thus it is with all who have high ideas of their own importance. They stop not to inquire whether any insult is intended; but construing every thing according to their own conceptions, they are as full of resentment on account of a fancied insult, as they would be if they had sustained the greatest injury: and in many instances do they sacrifice their most important interests to this self-applauding, but delusive, passion.]

2. His disappointed expectation—

[Naaman had formed an idea of the manner in which the Prophet would effect the cure: nor do we at all condemn the notions he had formed. But what right had he to be offended because the cure was not wrought with all the formalities that he had pictured to himself? If he received the benefit, did it signify to him in what way he received it? or had he any right to dictate

[b] ver. 12.

dictate to the Prophet, and to God, in what way the cure should be wrought? Yet, behold because his own expectations were not realized, he breaks out into a passion, and will not accept the blessing in God's appointed way.

This throws a great light on innumerable occasions of offence which are taken even among good people. We paint to ourselves the way in which we think others ought to act; and then, because they do not answer our expectations, we are offended. We forget that another person may not view every thing in precisely the same light that we do, or have exactly the same judgment about the best mode of acting under any given circumstances; and yet, as though we were infallible, and the other person were in full possession of our ideas, we are offended at him for not acting as we would have him; when most probably we ourselves, had we been in his situation, would not have followed the line of conduct which we had marked out for him. It is surprising how much disquietude this mistaken spirit occasions in men's own minds, and how many disagreements it produces in the world.]

3. His reigning unbelief—

[Though Naaman came expecting that a miracle should be wrought by the Prophet, yet would he not use the means which the Prophet prescribed. He did not expect the effect to be produced by the power of God, but by the mere act of washing in a river; and then he concluded, that the rivers of his own country were as competent to the end desired, as any river in Israel. Thus, because he saw not the suitableness of the means to the end, he would not use the means in order to the end, notwithstanding they were so easy, and so safe.

It is thus that unbelief continually argues: "God, I am told, would do such and such things for me, if I would apply to him in the use of such and such particular means: but what can those means effect?" This is an absurd mode of arguing: for, when God commanded Moses to smite the rock with his rod, did the promised effect not follow, because a stroke of his rod could not of itself produce it? God can work equally by means or without means; and whatever he prescribes, that it is our wisdom to do, in full expectation that what he promises shall surely be accomplished.

When Naaman was made sensible of his folly, and complied with the direction of the Prophet, then his disorder vanished; and "his flesh became like the flesh of a little child." And thus shall we find in relation to every thing which God has promised, that "according to our faith it will be unto us."]

We now proceed to consider this history,

II. In a way of spiritual accommodation—

We

We are not in general disposed to take Scripture in any other than its true and primary sense: though, as the inspired writers occasionally take passages of holy writ in an accommodated sense, we feel it to be a liberty which on some particular occasions we are warranted to take. We think it would be too much to say that this history was *intended* to shew how the Gentiles are to be washed from the guilt of sin; but sure we are that it is well adapted for that end: and, as the leprosy was certainly a type of sin, and the mode of purification from it was certainly typical of our purification from sin by the Redeemer's blood, we feel no impropriety in accommodating this history to elucidate the Gospel of Christ.

We have here then a lively representation of,

1. The character of the Gospel—

[Sin is absolutely incurable by any human means: but God has "opened a fountain for sin and for uncleanness;" and has bidden us to "Wash in it and be clean:" he has even reasoned with us, as Naaman's servants did with him, saying, "Come now, let us reason together; Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made white as snow; though they be red as crimson, they shall be as wool." In all the word of God there is not a more beautiful illustration of the Gospel method of salvation than this. We are simply required to wash in the blood of Christ by faith; and in so doing we shall immediately be cleansed from all sin. And with this agrees the direction given to the jailer, (the only one that can with propriety be given to one who inquires after the way of salvation,) "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."]

2. The treatment it meets with—

[Multitudes not only disregard it, but turn from it with disgust. In their eyes, the direction, "Wash and be clean," "Believe and be saved," is too simple, too free, too humiliating.

It is too simple. What! have I nothing to do, but to believe? Will this remove all my guilt? it cannot be — — —

It is too free. Surely some good works are necessary to prepare me for the Saviour, and to make me in some measure worthy of his favour. Must I receive every thing without money and without price, and acknowledge to all eternity that it is altogether the free gift of God in Christ Jesus, as free as the light I see, or the air I breathe? I cannot but regard such a proposal as subversive of all morality.

Lastly, It is too humiliating. Must I no more bring my good deeds

deeds than my bad ones, and no more hope for mercy on account of my good life than publicans and harlots can for theirs? This is a mode of righteousness which I never can, nor will, submit to[c].

Now persons who argue thus against the Gospel, are not unfrequently full of indignation against it, and against all who believe it. If called upon to do some great thing for the Gospel, they would engage in it gladly, and do it with all their might: but, if invited to accept its benefits by faith alone, they resent the offer as a wild conceit and an Anti-nomian delusion.]

From the striking resemblance which there is between the conduct of Naaman, and that of those who reject the Gospel, we shall take occasion to add a few words of ADVICE.

1. Bring not to the Gospel any preconceived notions of your own—

[Every man, of necessity forms to himself some idea of the way in which he is to obtain acceptance with God: but when we come to the holy Scriptures, we must lay aside all our own vain conceits, and sit at the feet of Jesus, to learn what he has spoken, and to do what he has commanded. We must not dictate to God what he shall say, but with the docility of little children receive instruction from him.]

2. Let not passion dictate in matters of religion—

[Many who hear perhaps a single sermon, or even a single expression, are offended, and shut their ears against the truth from that time. But, if candid investigation be ever called for, surely it is required in the concerns of religion; where the truths proposed must of necessity be offensive to the carnal mind, and where the consequences of admitting or rejecting them must so deeply affect our everlasting welfare.]

3. Be willing to take advice even from your inferiors—

[Naaman, under the influence of pride and passion, thought himself right in rejecting the proposals of the Prophet: but his servants saw how erroneously he judged, and how absurdly he acted. Thus many who are our inferiors in station or learning may see how unreasonably we act in the concerns of our souls, and especially in rejecting the Gospel of Christ. The Lord grant that we may be willing to listen to those who see more clearly than ourselves, and be as ready to use God's method of cleansing for our souls, as Naaman was for the healing of his body!]

4. Make

[c] Rom. x. 3.

4. Make trial of the method proposed for your salvation—

[No sooner did Naaman submit to use the means prescribed, than he derived from them all the benefit that he could desire. And shall any one go to Christ in vain? Shall any one wash in the fountain of his blood in vain? No: the most leprous of mankind shall be healed of his disorders; and the wonders of Bethesda's pool be renewed in all that will descend into it. Only remember that you must wash there *seven times*. You must not go to any other fountain to begin or perfect your cure: in Christ, and in Christ alone, you must seek all that your souls can stand in need of.]

CCXLIX.

NAAMAN BOWING IN THE HOUSE OF RIMMON.

2 Kin. v. 18, 19. *In this thing the Lord pardon thy servant, that when my master goeth into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon; when I bow down myself in the house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon thy servant in this thing. And he said unto him, Go in peace.*

THE operation of Divine grace is uniform in every age and place: it makes a total revolution in the views and habits of the person in whom it dwells. See how it wrought on Naaman! Before he felt its influence he was full of pride and unbelief; and notwithstanding his request for the healing of his leprosy was granted, yet because it was not granted in the precise way that he expected, he would not comply with the directions of the Prophet, but "turned, and went away in a rage." But, when his leprosy was healed, and in conjunction with that mercy the grace of God wrought powerfully upon his soul, he returned with most heartfelt gratitude to the Prophet, renounced his idol-worship, and devoted himself altogether to the God of Israel. At the same time however that he embraced the true religion, he made a request, which has been differently interpreted by different Commentators; some vindicating it as illustrative of a tender conscience, and others condemning it as an indication of an unsound mind.

We think that great and learned men are apt to judge

judge of particular passages, according as their own general views and habits of life incline them: those who are lax in their own conduct, leaning too much to a laxity of interpretation; and those who are strict in their principles, not daring, as it were, to concede to men the liberty which God has given them[a]. But we should neither abridge the Christian's liberty, nor extend it beyond its just bounds: and we apprehend that the passage before us will assist us materially in assigning to it its proper limits, and will itself receive the most satisfactory interpretation when viewed according to its plain and obvious import.

We propose then to consider,

I. The concession here made—

We do not hesitate to call Elisha's answer a concession. To regard it as an evasion of the question is to dishonour the Prophet exceedingly, and to contradict the plainest import of his words. His answer is precisely the same as that of Jethro to Moses[b]; and must be interpreted as an approbation of the plan proposed to him. Let us consider then the true import of Naaman's question—

[Naaman proposed to continue in the king of Syria's service, and to attend him as usual to the house of Rimmon, the god whom his master worshipped: and as his master always leaned upon his arm on those occasions, (a practice common with kings at that time, even with the kings of Israel, as well as others[c],) he must of necessity accommodate himself to his master's motion, and bow forward when he did, in order not to obstruct him in his worship. This he proposed to do; and his communication of his intentions to the Prophet must be understood in a two-fold view; namely, *As an inquiry for the regulation of his judgment*, and *as a guard against a misconstruction of his conduct*.

The case was certainly one of great difficulty, and especially to a young convert, to whom such considerations were altogether new. On the one hand, he felt in his own mind that he should not participate in the worship of his master; and yet he felt that his conduct would be open to such a construction. Having therefore

[a] We conceive that few Christians in the world would have approved of the statement in Rom. xiv. if it had not been contained in the inspired volume.

[b] Exod. iv. 18. [c] Ch. vii. 2, 17.

fore access to an inspired prophet, he was glad to have his difficulty solved, that so he might act as became a servant of Jehovah, and enjoy the testimony of a good conscience.

Being determined, if the Prophet should approve of it, so to act, he desired to cut off all occasion for blame from others. He knew how ready people are to view things in an unfavourable light; and that, if he should do this thing of himself, he might appear to be unfaithful to his convictions, and to have relapsed to idolatry: he therefore entered, as it were, a protest against any such surmises, and gave a public pledge that he would do nothing that should be inconsistent with his professed attachment to Jehovah.

In this view of the subject, his question was every way right and proper. The honour of God and the salvation of his own soul depended on his not doing any thing that should be inconsistent with his profession; and therefore he did right to ask advice: and lest he should by any means cast a stumbling-block before others, he did well in explaining his views and intentions beforehand. What terrible evils had well nigh arisen from the neglect of such a precaution, when the tribes of Reuben and of Gad erected an altar on the banks of Jordan[d]! ——— On the other hand, what evils were avoided, when Paul explained his sentiments in the first instance *privately* to the elders of Jerusalem, instead of exciting prejudice and clamour by a hasty and indiscriminate avowal of them in public[e]! It is thus that we should act with all possible circumspection, not only avoiding evil, but "abstaining as much as possible from the very appearance of it[f];" and not only doing good, but endeavouring to prevent "our good from being evil spoken of[g]."]

The import of the answer given to it—

[This answer is not to be understood as a connivance at what was evil, but as an acknowledgment that Naaman might expect the divine blessing whilst pursuing the conduct he had proposed. Can we imagine that Naaman at that moment saw the thing to be evil, and yet desired a dispensation to commit it? Did he, at the very moment that he was rejecting all false gods, and acknowledging Jehovah as the only true God, and determining to build an altar to Jehovah in his own country, and desiring earth from Jehovah's land to build it upon, did he *then*, I say, at *that* moment ask for a licence to play the hypocrite? and can we suppose that he would confess such an intention to Elisha, and ask *his* sanction to it? or can we imagine that Elisha, knowing this, would approve of it, or give an evasive answer, instead of reprobating such impiety? Assuredly not: the Request itself, as made on that occasion, must of necessity have proceeded

[d] Josh. xxii. 9—34. [e] Gal. ii. 2. [f] 1 Thess. v. 22.
[g] Rom. xiv. 16.

proceeded from an upright mind; and the Prophet's concession is an indisputable proof, that the request, made under those particular circumstances, was approved by him. Elisha saw that Naaman was upright: he knew that the bowing or not bowing was a matter of indifference in itself; and that, where it was not done as an act of dissimulation, nor was likely to be mistaken by others as an act of worship, it might be done with a good conscience; more especially as it was accompanied with a public disavowal of all regard for idols; and arose only out of the accidental circumstance of the king leaning on his hand at those seasons. In this view of the subject, the Prophet did not hesitate to say to him, "Go in peace."]

Such, we are persuaded, was the concession made. Let us now proceed to consider,

II. The instruction to be gathered from it—

The more carefully we examine this concession, the more instructive will it be found. We may learn from it,

1. How to determine the quality of doubtful actions—

[Many actions, such as observing of holy days, or eating meats offered to idols, are indifferent in themselves, and may be good or evil, according to circumstances. Two things then are to be inquired into, namely, *The circumstances under which they are done;* and, *The principles from which they flow.*

Had Naaman acted from a love to the world, or from a fear of man, his conduct would have been highly criminal: or, if by accommodating himself to the motions of the king he would have cast a stumbling-block before others, he would have sinned in doing it: but *with his views*, and *under his circumstances*, his conduct was wholly unexceptionable.

In this sentiment we are confirmed by the conduct of St. Paul. St. Paul, when taking Timothy with him as a fellow-labourer, circumcised him, in order to remove the prejudices of the Jews, who would not otherwise have received him on account of his father being a Greek: but, when required to circumcise Titus, he refused, and would on no account give way; because a compliance in that case was demanded as a necessary conformity with the Mosaic law, which was now abolished. In both these cases he acted right, because of the difference of the circumstances under which he acted. So, when "he became all things to all men," he acted right, as well in conforming to legal observance as in abstaining from them, because his principle was right[gg]: whilst Peter, on the contrary, sinned in a very grievous manner by conforming to the Jewish prejudices, because he acted from

[gg] Acts xxi. 22—26. & 1 Cor. ix. 19—22.

from fear, and not from love. We do not mean to say, that every action which proceeds from a good principle, is therefore right; for *no principle, however good, can sanctify a bad nation, though a bad principle will vitiate the best of actions*[h]: but an investigation of the principle from which an action flows, accompanied with an attention to the circumstances under which it is done, will serve as the best clue whereby to find what is really good, and to distinguish it from all specious and delusive appearances.]

2. How to act in doubtful cases—

[Circumstances must sometimes arise, wherein it is difficult to draw the precise line between good and evil: and in all such cases we shall do well to consult those, whose deeper knowledge and exalted piety and more enlarged experience qualify them for the office of guiding others. We are ourselves liable to be biassed by passion or interest; and are therefore oftentimes too partial judges in our own cause. Another person, divested of all such feelings, can generally see more clearly where the path of duty lies. We shall always therefore do well to distrust ourselves, and to take advice of others[hh]: but, above all, we should take counsel of the Lord. He has promised, that "the meek he will guide in judgment, the meek he will teach his way:" and, though we are not to expect a voice from heaven to instruct us, or a pillar of fire to go before us, yet may we hope for such an influence of his Spirit as shall rectify our views, and be, *in effect*, an accomplishment of that promise, "Thou shalt hear a voice behind thee saying, 'This is the way, walk ye in it,' when ye turn to the right hand and when ye turn to the left[i]."

If, after much deliberation we cannot make up our minds, it it best to pause, till we see our way more clear. The commandments given us by God himself on this point, are very express: "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind:" "Happy is that man who condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth; for he that doubteth is damned (condemned) if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin[k]." But, if we are upright in our minds, and inquire of others, not to get a sanction to our own wishes, but to obtain direction from the Lord, we shall certainly not be left materially to err; and for the most part, we shall at all events enjoy the "testimony of our own consciences, that with simplicity and godly sincerity we have had our conversation in the world[l]."]

3. How to do deal with tender consciences—

[The Prophet did not begin to perplex the mind of Naaman with nice distinctions; but seeing the integrity of his heart, encouraged

[h] See Haggai ii. 12, 13.
[hh] See how the Church of old acted, Acts xv. 1, 2.
[i] Isai. xxx. 21. [k] Rom. xiv. 5, 22, 23. [l] 2 Cor. i. 12.

encouraged him to proceed; not doubting but that, as occasions arose, God himself would "guide him into all truth." Thus should we also deal with young converts[m]: we should feed them with milk, and not with meat, which, on account of their unskilfulness in the word of righteousness, they would not be able to digest[n]. There may be many things proper for them both to know and do at a future period, which, under their present circumstances, need not be imparted, and are not required. We should therefore deal tenderly towards them, being careful not to lay upon them any unnecessary burthen, or exact of them any unnecessary labours; lest we "break the bruised reed, and quench the smoking flax:" our endeavour rather must be to "lift up the hands that hang down, and to strengthen the feeble knees, and to make strait paths for their feet, that the lame may not be turned out of the way, but may rather be healed[o]." This was our Lord's method[p] — — — and an attention to it is of infinite importance in all who would be truly serviceable in the Church of Christ.]

Lest this subject be misunderstood, we shall conclude with answering the following QUESTIONS:

1. May we ever do evil that good may come?

[No: to entertain such a thought were horrible impiety: and if any man impute it to us, we say with St. Paul, that "his damnation is just[q]." But still we must repeat what we said before, that things which would be evil under some circumstances, may not be so under others; and that whilst the question itself can admit of no doubt, the application of it may: and we ought not either to judge our stronger, or despise our weaker, brethren, because they do not see every thing with our eyes[r]; for both the one and the other may be accepted before God, whilst we for our uncharitableness are hateful in his sight[s].]

2. May we from regard to any considerations of ease or interest act contrary to our conscience?

[No: conscience is God's vicegerent in the soul, and we must at all events obey its voice. We must rather die than violate its dictates. Like Daniel and the Hebrew youths, we must be firm and immoveable. If a man err, it will never be imputed to him as evil that he followed his conscience, but that he did not take care to have his conscience better informed. We must use all possible means to get clear views of God's mind and will; and, having done that, must then act according to our convictions, omitting nothing that conscience requires, and allowing nothing

[m] Rom. xiv. 1. [n] John xvi. 12. 1 Cor. iii. 2. Heb. v. 11—14.
[o] Heb. xii. 12, 13. [p] Matt. ix. 14—17. [q] Rom. iii. 8.
[r] Rom. xiv. 3—6. [s] ib. 10, 18.

nothing that conscience condemns. The one endeavour of our lives must be to "walk in all good conscience before God," and to "keep a conscience void of offence towards God and man."]

3. May we on any account forbear to confess Christ?

[No: we must shew, before all, our love to the God of Israel, and our communion with his people. In every place where we go, we must erect an altar to our God and Saviour. "If on any account we are ashamed of him, he will be ashamed of us;" and, "if we deny him, he will deny us." Nevertheless we are not called to throw up our situations in life, because there is some difficulty in filling them aright: we are rather called to approve ourselves to God in those situations, and to fill them to the glory of his name. We must indeed take care that we are not led into any sinful compliances in order to retain our honours or emoluments; but we must avail ourselves of our situations to honour God, and to benefit mankind.]

CCL.

THE HYPOCRISY OF GEHAZI.

2 Kin. v. 21, 22. *So Gehazi followed after Naaman. And when Naaman saw him running after him, he lighted down from the chariot to meet him, and said, Is all well? And he said, All is well.*

IN the preceding chapter we have seen a similar inquiry made by Gehazi himself; and a similar reply from the Shunamite, who came in quest of Elisha*. The answer as made by her, under her most afflictive circumstances, justly fills us with admiration: but the answer as here given, calls forth our severest indignation. Naaman, when he saw Elisha's servant running after him, was afraid that something was amiss; and therefore asked with great anxiety, Is all well? The hardened villain, one might have hoped, should have relented at the sight of Naaman's simplicity: but that same wicked spirit who put the evil into his heart, furnished him with a ready answer, "All is well." Now this answer is of considerable importance;

I. As illustrating the character of Gehazi—

[Previous to this we have nothing that gives us any particular

* Ch. iv. 26.

ticular insight into the character of Gehazi. He lived with a pious master, enjoyed the benefit of his instructions and example, and was an eye-witness of the miracles he wrought. One might have hoped therefore that he was impressed with a sense of true religion. But in this answer we see that he was a subtle self-deluding hypocrite.

As far as related to the general scope of Naaman's inquiry, the answer was true: but was it true, as conveying all that Gehazi intended to convey? or would Naaman have thought it true, if he could have seen all that was in the heart of this vile impostor? Was all well, when thou wast coming on so base an errand? when thou hadst fabricated such a falsehood; and wast making it an occasion of such dishonest gain? Was all well, when thou wast so belying thy master, so dishonouring religion, casting such a stumbling-block before Naaman, and bringing such guilt upon thine own soul? Did not thine own conscience reprove thee, when thou thus confidently dared'st to assert, All is well?

From his composure on the occasion it was evident, that he expected to reap the fruit of his iniquity in peace; and that, when he replied, "All is well," he apprehended no evil. But didst thou forget that God saw thee? Didst thou forget that he noteth down every thing in the book of his remembrance, and will bring it forth at the last day in order to a final retribution? Didst thou forget that even now God could reveal thy wickedness to his prophet, and punish it by some heavy judgment? Hadst thou known at that moment that thy master's eye was upon thee, and that in less than an hour afterwards the leprosy of Naaman would cleave to thee, and that it would be the wretched inheritance of thy children to their latest posterity, wouldst thou then have said, that All was well? Above all, if thou couldst have realized thine appearance at the bar of judgment, and the sentence that there awaited thee, wouldst thou have said, All is well?

But so it is that sin blinds the eyes of men, and hardens their hearts: nor is there any passion in the human mind, which, if suffered to gain an ascendant over us, may not produce in us the very same effect. The ambition of Absalom, the envy of Cain, the malice of Esau, the revenge of Jacob's sons, the covetousness of Judas, the lewdness of Herod, sufficiently shew, that, where there is some professed regard for religion, a predominant lust will soon break down the barriers of conscience, and bring into subjection every better principle — — —]

Let us now contemplate the answer,

II. As affording some valuable lessons to the world at large—

The great improvement which we are to make of Scripture history, is, to deduce from every part of it lessons for our own instruction. Now from the conduct of Gehazi we learn,

1. That such characters must be expected to exist—

[If in the house of Elisha, his only servant was such an impostor; if even among the Apostles of our Lord there was a Judas; yea, and if among the very first Christians immediately after the day of Pentecost such a deceiver as Ananias was found; what reason have we to be surprised, if such characters exist in our day? Is not human nature now the same as ever it was? And has not our Lord taught us to expect, that, wherever the seed of his word is sown, the enemy will sow tares; and that no effectual separation of the tares can be made till the last day? Doubtless it is most distressing when any are found to act unworthy of their Christian profession; but the wonder is rather that so few hypocrites are found, than that some occasionally are detected in the Church of Christ.]

2. That the existence of such characters is no argument against true religion—

[People are apt to impute the misconduct of hypocrites to the doctrine they profess. But is there any thing in the Gospel that tends to encourage hypocrisy? Is not every branch of morality carried to its utmost height in the Gospel, and required as an evidence of our faith in Christ? Are all who embrace the Gospel hypocrites? Was Elisha a hypocrite because his servant was so? What would Naaman have said, if he had been dissuaded from embracing Judaism because he had been imposed upon by a Jew? Would he not have said, 'The man's wickedness must rest on his own head: religion does not stand or fall with him: I am myself a monument of Jehovah's power and grace, and am under the most unspeakable obligations to him; and, if all that profess his religion were hypocrites, it would be no reason why I should not worship him in spirit and in truth.' Thus then must we say, "Offences will come; and woe be to those by whom they come:" but whilst I know myself to have been a leper, and feel that the Lord Jesus Christ has healed me of my leprosy, I must love him as my benefactor, and serve him in the presence of the whole world.]

3. That in whatever light men now appear, they will ere long be seen in their true colours—

[Gehazi little thought that his master's eye was upon him during the whole transaction: but his iniquity was soon exposed, and fearfully punished. Thus, in whatever place we be, God's

God's eye is upon us. In vain do we say, "Tush, God shall not see;" for he does see even the most secret recesses of our hearts: and the time is quickly coming, when he "will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and make manifest the counsels of the heart."

Let not any of us then deceive our own souls. Let *those who declaim against hypocrites* remember, that, if they seek not after God, the hypocrisy of others will be no justification of their neglect: there is but one rule of judgment for all, and by that shall every man be justified or condemned[b].

But let *those in whom hypocrisy of any kind is found*, tremble for themselves; for their guilt is heinous, and their condemnation will be proportionably severe. "If there be woe to the world because of offences, much more will there be to him by whom the offence cometh." Against every sin therefore I would most earnestly caution you, but more especially against that which ensnared Gehazi. "The love of money is the root of all evil, and drowns many in destruction and perdition[c]." This is most particularly the sin to which persons professing godliness are apt to be addicted, and under which they are most satisfied with their own state[d]: but, whatever profession they may make, they deceive themselves to their eternal ruin.]

[b] Isai. iii. 10, 11.
[c] 1 Tim. vi. 9, 10. 2 Tim. iv. 10. 2 Pet. ii. 14, 15.
[d] Ezek. xxxiii. 31.

CCLI.

ELISHA PROTECTED BY CHARIOTS OF FIRE.

2 Kin. vi. 15, 16. *And his servant said unto him, Alas, my master! how shall we do? And he answered, Fear not; for they that be with us are more than they that be with them.*

IT has been justly said, that a servant of God is immortal, till his work is done. He will indeed be exposed to many dangers; and probably to more, in proportion as his zeal is exercised in the service of his Lord: but the promise made to Jeremiah is fulfilled to every faithful champion; "They shall fight against thee; but they shall not prevail against thee." The prophet Elisha eminently experienced this blessed truth. He had been enabled by God on different occasions to reveal to the king of Israel the plans which the king of Syria had laid for his destruction.

destruction. The king of Syria at first thought that his plans were all betrayed by some confidential servant of his own: but when he learned that they were revealed by God to the prophet Elisha, he determined to destroy the prophet; and for that end he sent not a small band, such as had failed in apprehending Elijah, but a large army to besiege the city wherein he was. This was effected with such rapidity, that the city was encompassed before any one suspected that an army was near: and Elisha's servant, conceiving that the enmity of the king of Syria was chiefly directed against his master, was filled with despondency; taking for granted now that no possible method of escape for him remained. But Elisha knew that God was his protector, and therefore bade him dismiss his fears, assured that, whilst he had the Creator on his side, he need not feel the smallest anxiety, though the whole creation should be against him.

Now from this answer of Elisha we shall take occasion to shew you the excellency and efficacy of faith, in its discoveries, its consolations, its triumphs. Let us consider,

I. Its discoveries—

[The affrighted servant saw nothing but the invading army: but Elisha saw that there were invisible hosts of angels engaged in his defence: and he begged of God to open the servant's eyes, that he might have ocular demonstration of that fact, which he had beheld by faith.

Now this is the proper effect of faith[a]: it discerns God as every where present to succour and support his people by his *providence* and *grace*. Faith beholds myriads of angels also waiting upon God, and flying at his command to execute his will, and to minister to his people. The chariots of fire and horses of fire were not more visible to the eye of sense, when God withdrew from the servant's face the veil that concealed them, than they were to Elisha by the eye of faith. If we could only conceive aright of Elisha's views at that moment, we should have a perfect idea of the proper office of faith, and of the high privilege which belongs to every Believer — — —]

From the discoveries of faith we may judge of,

II. Its

[a] Heb. xi. 27.

II. Its consolations—

[The servant was full of fear and terror; "Alas, my master! what shall we do?" But Elisha was as composed as if no enemy had been nigh. Thus it is that faith uniformly operates. However we be menaced by persecutors, it keeps us tranquil[b]: however exposed we be to troubles of any kind, it preserves us in a peaceful state[c]. How calm were Daniel and the Hebrew youths, when menaced with the most cruel death! It assures us that though the waves and billows rise ever so high, there is at the helm a pilot, who can guide our vessel in safety to the desired haven. The language of the heart on such occasions is, "If God be for me, who can be against me?" or, "Who is he that shall harm me, if I be a follower of that which is good?"]

They who in conflicts experience the consolations of faith, shall after their conflicts enjoy also,

III. Its triumphs—

[Whilst the servant was yielding to despair, the master was deriding the vain efforts of his enemies, and laughing them to scorn. In this light we must understand his address to them: it was not a solemn assertion, but a derisive banter; "You are come hither to seek the Prophet, but you are all under a mistake: come all of you with me; I will shew you the man whom you are seeking after:" and thus did he, alone and unarmed, lead captive, as it were, the armed hosts that came to apprehend him. Innumerable are the instances in holy writ where faith has triumphed in like manner, even before the conflict has been begun. How did Moses exult over the Egyptians[d]; David over Goliath[e]; Jehosaphat over three confederate armies[f]; and Hezekiah over the proud Sennacherib[g]! and with what glorious confidence did Paul glory over all the enemies of his salvation[h]! Thus it is our privilege also to "know in whom we have believed," and to be assured that we shall be more than conquerors through Him that loved us[i]."]

From this subject we may LEARN,

1. Our chief danger—

[The agency of spiritual beings is here confirmed beyond all doubt: and, if holy angels are active in our preservation, we may be well assured that evil angels are active in seeking our destruction. The truth is, that we are more in danger from the agency of evil spirits than from all other causes whatever;

[b] Ps. iii. 6. & xxvii. 3. & 1 Pet. iii. 14, 15. [c] Isai. xxvi. 3.
[d] Exod. xiv. 13, 14. [e] 1 Sam. xvii. 45—47.
[f] 2 Chron. xx. 17, 20. [g] 2 Kin. xix. 21.
[h] Rom. viii. 34—39. [i] See Isai. viii. 12—14. & xxvi. 20.

ever; because of their malice, their subtlety, and their power. Were our eyes opened as those of Elisha's servant were, we should see ourselves surrounded with myriads of those malignant foes, all acting in concert with each other under Beelzebub their head, and combining their efforts to destroy us. Let us remember how they are "working in all the children of disobedience," and actually "leading the whole world captive at their will." Let us particularly call to mind also the power which Satan exerted over Judas, Ananias, and even the apostle Peter himself: and let us, under a sense of our insufficiency to withstand him, cry mightily to God, "to arm us for the combat, to strengthen us with might, and to bruise him under our feet[k]."]

2. Our great security—

[Of ourselves we have no sufficiency for the smallest thing: all our sufficiency is of God. Let us beg of God then to "hold us up, that we may be safe." Let our eyes be directed to him in every danger, temporal and spiritual; and let us "commit the keeping of our souls to him in well-doing." Then, how numerous soever our enemies may be, "we shall not be ashamed or confounded world without end." He will not leave us in the hands of any enemy, but will "keep us by his power through faith unto everlasting salvation."]

[k] Eph. vi. 10—18. Isai. xli. 10. Rom. xvi. 20.

CCLII.

THE UNBELIEVING LORD PUNISHED.

2 Kin. vii. 18—20. *And it came to pass, as the man of God had spoken to the king, saying, Two measures of barley for a shekel, and a measure of fine flour for a shekel, shall be to-morrow, about this time, in the gate of Samaria: and that lord answered the man of God, and said, Now, behold, if the Lord should make windows in heaven, might such a thing be? And he said, Behold, thou shalt see it with thine eyes, but shalt not eat thereof. And so it fell out unto him: for the people trode upon him in the gate, and he died.*

THIS is a repetition of what had been said in the two first verses of this chapter; or rather it is a renewed recital of the prediction, as accomplished in all its parts. Now we are not to imagine that this repetition was without design. It was doubtless intended to call our attention to the history in a more peculiar manner, that we might observe it carefully throughout. In truth, it is a singularly instructive

tive history, especially as discovering to us, what we propose distinctly to consider, the *folly* and *danger* of unbelief.

I. The folly of unbelief—

Faith appears to many to be a weak credulity; and unbelief, a discreet estimate of causes and effects. Sceptics look with contempt upon Believers, even as this nobleman did upon the prophet, for expecting himself, and teaching others to expect, so incredible an event, as that which he foretold. But this history rebukes the folly of such conceited men. They imagine that they have sufficient reason for their unbelief: but this history shews us, that all those things which are supposed to justify unbelief, are, in fact, no grounds for it at all. There are three grounds in particular, which, as most commonly urged in its defence, it will be proper for us to consider:—

1. The extremity of our case—

[Many, both under temporal and spiritual distresses, will say, that there is no hope; and that to expect relief under such circumstances as theirs would be the height of presumption. But can any state be more desperate than that of Samaria at this time? The famine was so grievous, that things which would not have been deemed fit for food at other times, were made articles of subsistence; nor could they be procured but at a most exorbitant price. Yea, so extreme was the pressure of their hunger, that a woman, who had agreed with another to boil their children for their mutual support, came to the king, to complain of the other woman for having hid her child, instead of giving it up according to their agreement, after having already fed upon the child of the complainant[a]. Can any case be more extreme than this? We are almost ready to justify the nobleman who doubted the possibility of plenty being restored to the city in so short a time as twenty-four hours. But there are no circumstances under which God cannot interpose with effect[b]. On the contrary, he is pleased frequently to let our troubles advance so as to appear irremediable, on purpose that his power may be the more magnified in our deliverance[c].]

2. Our great unworthiness—

[It is nothing but pride, under the semblance of humility, that leads any upright person to be discouraged by a sense of his

[a] Ch. vi. 25—29. with Deut. xxviii. 56, 57. [b] Isai. lix. 1.
[c] Deut. xxxii. 36.

his unworthiness. If a man live in wilful and allowed sin, he doubtless can expect nothing at the hands of God: but, if he desire to be delivered from all sin, the deeper his sense is of his own unworthiness, the more readily will he find acceptance in the sight of God. The truth is, that God gives freely according to his own sovereign will and pleasure; and often makes his "grace to abound most where sin has most abounded." To whom did he send the promise recorded in our text? To Jehoram, an idolatrous king of Israel. And under what circumstances did he send the promise? It was, when this wicked prince, instead of being humbled by his distresses, took occasion from them to rage still more against the God of Israel; and immediately after he had, with bitter imprecations, resolved to murder the Lord's prophet that very day[d]. Yes to that very murderer, at the moment he was about to commit the murder, was that promise given! It is scarcely possible to conceive a state of greater unworthiness than his: yet, behold, to *him*, I say again, was the promise given. Who then that desires an interest in the Lord's promises, has any reason to despond on account of his unworthiness?]

3. The want of any visible means of relief—

[The nobleman doubted whether the prediction could be verified, even if the Lord should open the windows of heaven, and rain down wheat and barley upon them, as he did manna in the wilderness. And as there was no hope of *such* an interposition, he concluded the prediction to be false. But what if *he* could see no way of relief: was *God* at any loss for means whereby to accomplish his own purposes? The Syrians shall be struck with a panic, and with perfect infatuation shall desert their camp and every thing in it. Still the purpose is but half effected: for, how shall the people in the city know the state of the Syrian camp? Four lepers perishing with hunger, shall go over to the Syrians, to cast themselves upon their mercy; and they shall find the whole camp forsaken, and report it in the besieged city: and thus shall perfect plenty be afforded them even in the space of a few hours. What then cannot God effect for us? Whether our distress be of a temporal or spiritual nature, he can in a moment "supply our wants," and far "exceed all that we can ask, or even think." "Is there any thing too hard for God?"]

If in this history we see the folly of unbelief, we behold no less,

II. The danger of it—

Unbelief is justly most offensive to God—

[Its very nature is to doubt the power or veracity of God. And is this a light offence? See how greatly he was offended at it

[d] Ch. vi. 31, 32.

it in his people of old[e]: and doubtless he will be still more offended at us on account of it, in proportion as his mercy and truth manifested to us in the gift of his dear Son, have exceeded all that he has ever shewn to mankind from the foundation of the world — — —]

In the history before us we see how certainly, and how awfully, it shall be punished—

[The moment that the nobleman had expressed his contempt of God's promise, his doom was sealed, and his punishment declared. But the nobleman, being high in the confidence of his prince, was invested with authority to controul and regulate the disposal of the spoil: consequently, if there were any one person in the city that was sure to enjoy the newly-acquired plenty, it was he. Yet, behold, the very means which seemed almost sure to defeat the divine purpose, were instrumental to its accomplishment: for the extreme eagerness of the people to obtain the food, occasioned him to be thrown down, and to be trodden to death under their feet. Yes; so had God threatened; and "*so it fell out unto him.*"

Say then, ye who promise yourselves impunity in sin, whether "God's word shall stand, or yours?" Shall it not "fall out unto you as God has said?" Yes, it shall: and "unbelievers shall assuredly take their portion at the last in the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone[f]." See what became of those who doubted God's word in Paradise[g], or of the Antediluvian infidels[h], or of the unbelieving Israelites in the wilderness[i]! did not God's threatened vengeance fall on them? "Beware then, all of you, lest you also perish after the same example of unbelief[k]." Whether God promise or threaten, it shall surely come to pass according to his word: "If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself[l]."

We may even notice some resemblance between the doom of that nobleman, and that which awaits the unbelieving world at large: "He saw the promised blessing, but he did not taste of it." And will it not be thus in that great and awful day when all shall stand at the judgment-seat of Christ? Those on the left hand of the Judge shall see the blessedness of his believing people, but shall not taste of it: on the contrary, whilst God's faithful people shall be admitted to a full enjoyment of their promised inheritance, the whole assembly of unbelievers shall be bidden to "depart accursed into everlasting burnings."]

APPLICATION—

[Consider now how you are affected by the word of God: does

[e] Ps. lxxviii. 40, 41. [f] Rev. xxi. 8.
[g] Gen. iii. 6, 16—19, 24. [h] 2 Pet. iii. 3—6.
[i] Heb. iii. 18, 19. See also especially Zech. i. 6.
[k] Heb. iv. 11. [l] 2 Tim. ii. 13.

does it come with weight and authority to your minds, as if you saw it about to be accomplished before your eyes? Is it a fixed principle with you, that "not one jot or tittle of that word can fail?" This is what God expects at our hands: he expects us to "tremble at his word[m];" to entertain no doubt of its accomplishment, but to "be strong in faith, giving glory to God." On that he suspends his bestowment of further blessings[n]: and, for the most part, he will make *the strength of our faith* to be the *measure of his communications*[o].

Consider more particularly, how you are affected with all those "great and precious promises which he has given us" in Christ Jesus. Are you enabled to receive them "without staggering at them through unbelief?" This is your duty, this your privilege, this the pledge and earnest of all that God himself can bestow upon you.]

[m] Isai. lxvi. 2. [n] Jam. i. 6, 7. [o] Matt. viii. 13.

CCLIII.

ELISHA PREDICTS THE ATROCIOUS ACTS OF HAZAEL.

2 Kin. viii. 12. *And Hazael said, Why weepeth my lord? And he answered, Because I know the evil that thou wilt do unto the children of Israel.*

TO reconcile Divine foreknowledge with the contingency of human events is a difficulty, which probably will never be solved in this present state of our existence. Yet, if it cannot be explained, it may be illustrated in some measure, and in such a way as to afford considerable satisfaction to the mind. In the history of which our text is a part, there is a circumstance which reflects some light upon it. Benhadad, king of Syria, was ill; and, hearing that Elisha was come into his country, he sent his servant Hazael, with very large and munificent presents, to inquire whether he should recover of his disease. The question being asked by Hazael, Elisha told him, that his master "might certainly recover;" but yet "should surely die[a]." Here we see the termination of the disorder doubtful in one view, but certain in another: he *might* recover, because his constitution was strong enough to withstand the disorder; but he *should*

[a] ver. 10.

should not recover, because God foresaw that a measure would be resorted to, which would render the disorder fatal. Thus it is also with our spiritual maladies: they *may*, with the use of God's appointed remedies, be healed; but God knows infallibly whether we shall make use of those remedies, and, consequently, sees already what the event will be: in his eyes, it is as certain as if it had already taken place; but his view of it does not at all affect its contingency with respect to us.

Not intending to prosecute this subject any farther, we merely glance at it, as introductory to that on which the issue of the king's disorder turned. There was in the heart of Hazael a root of evil, which would induce him to destroy the king, in order to gain possession of his throne: and that root springing up, would bring forth such terrible fruits, as could not be contemplated without the most pungent sorrow. This the Prophet saw, and deeply lamented; insomuch, that Hazael, astonished at the fixedness of the Prophet's countenance, and at the tears which he shed, asked him with great emotion, "Why weepeth my lord?" The Prophet told him, that he wept at the prospect of the horrible cruelties, which, however incapable of committing them he might now think himself, he would certainly ere long commit.

This is the point to which we would now call your attention: and it is well calculated to shew us,

I. How unconscious we are of our own depravity—

Hazael could not conceive it possible that the Prophet's predictions respecting him should ever be fulfilled—

[Doubtless the predicted evils were very terrible[b]: nor do we wonder that Hazael should ask so pointedly, "Is thy servant a dog, that he should do this great thing[c]?" But he was a stranger

[b] ver. 12.

[c] This is supposed by some to mean, "How can so *insignificant* a creature as I am, do such great things?" But the common interpretation seems the more natural, more especially as the situation he occupied under Benhadad rendered the performance of such things not so very impracticable, if he should ever be disposed to do them.

stranger to his own heart, and ignorant of the effect which a change of circumstances may produce in our dispositions and conduct — — — The event soon verified all that the Prophet had spoken concerning him: for, immediately on his return to his master, he gave a false report of the Prophet's answer, and (probably under a pretence of using the best means for his recovery) adopted a measure, which he had reason to expect would speedily put a period to his existence. Having by these means succeeded to the throne, he soon waged war with Israel, and committed all those shocking cruelties, at the very mention of which he had once shrunk back with horror[d].]

Thus also do we question the representations which God gives respecting us—

[These are doubtless very humiliating, both in the Old Testament and the New[e] — — — And we are ready to account them libels upon human nature. If we have been moral and sober hitherto, we have no conception that we could ever be induced to "run to the same excess of riot" as others have done. But may we not all find in ourselves the seeds of those iniquities, which in others have obtained their full growth? Have we not seen too, in many instances, that persons who once thought themselves as superior to temptation as we now do, have sunk into the grossest habits of vice, and astonished the world with their iniquities? We can know but little of ourselves, if we have not learned to ascribe to God alone whatever difference there may be found between us and others[f].]

Let us learn then from the Prophet,

II. What ought to be the frame of our minds in relation to it—

If we have not been left by God to perpetrate the more heinous crimes to which we have been tempted, still it will be proper for us to consider what our frame should be,

1. In reference to our depravity, as far as we have discovered it—

[Elisha wept at the contemplation of the future crimes of Hazael: and should not we *weep* at the evils of *our own* hearts, yea at the evils which we have actually committed? Verily, the best of us have done enough to humble us in the dust, and to make us weep with the deepest self-abasement. Let us look back and think of our past conduct towards God as our Sovereign, towards Jesus as our Redeemer, and towards the Holy Spirit, who

[d] ver. 15. & chap. xiii. 3, 7.
[e] Jer. xvii. 9. Eccl. ix. 3. Gen. vi. 5. Rom. iii. 10—19. & viii. 7.
[f] 1 Cor. iv. 7.

who has been striving with us all our days——— Is here no cause for tears? If Prophets and Apostles wept so bitterly for others who kept not God's law, should not we for ourselves[s]? Yes, the best of us, as well as the worst, needs to "go on his way weeping," and can only hope to reap in joy, when he shall have humbly "sown in tears"———]

2. In reference to that which is yet hid from our eyes—

[Much, very much, there is in us, which we have never yet seen: either we have never been brought into situations to call it forth, or God has mercifully withheld us from perpetrating all that was in our hearts. But our hearts are altogether corrupt; and therefore we should *tremble*, yea and "work out our salvation with fear and trembling," even to our latest hour: "we should not be high-minded, but fear;" "watching continually and praying, that we may not enter into temptation." The confidence of Peter, as well as that of Hazael, may be a lesson to us. To God then must we look to "keep us by his power," even to Him who alone "can keep us from falling, and present us faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy."]

That we may yet further IMPROVE this subject, let us learn,

1. To be thankful for God's grace—

[What is the reason that we have not been as vile as the most abandoned of mankind? Are we made of any better materials than they? or have we in ourselves any more strength than they? No: we owe it entirely to the distinguishing grace of God. It is He who has "hedged up our way," and even in many instances "built a wall against us," that we might not fall into those temptations which would have utterly overwhelmed us: "He kept us, though we knew him not;" and "by his grace alone we are what we are." O let us adore and magnify him for all his goodness towards us; and when we see others wallowing in iniquity, remember who alone has made us to differ from them!]

2. To be submissive to his providence—

[It may be that God has been pleased to disappoint us in some things which we have set our heart upon; and we have been grieved and vexed at the dispensation. But how little do we know what would have been the effect of success! Perhaps the attainment of our wishes would have operated as Hazael's advancement did on him, and we should have long before this time have been even monsters in iniquity. At all events we have reason to believe that what we have lost was only

[s] Ps. cxix. 136. Jer. xiii. 17. Rom. ix. 1—3. Phil. iii. 18.

only like thick clay, which would have impeded us greatly in our Christian course. Perhaps God has seen fit to lay upon us some heavy affliction. Are we sure it was not necessary to lead us to deeper views of our own corruption, and to a more entire dependence on the Lord Jesus? We may be sure at least that our afflictions have been sent, as the pruning-knife, to lop off our luxuriant branches, and to make us more fruitful in the fruits of righteousness to God's praise and glory.]

3. To pant after his glory—

[It is in heaven alone that we shall be free from sin. Whilst we are in the body, we are exposed to the assaults of that roaring lion, that seeketh to devour us. True it is, we have God's promises to trust unto; but true it is also that we have wicked and deceitful hearts; and if we had attained as much as ever the Apostle Paul did, we must still, like him, "keep under our body, and bring it into subjection, lest by any means, after having preached to others, we should be cast away ourselves." Let us then "look for, and haste unto, the coming of the day of Christ," even that blessed day, when all sin shall be purged from our hearts, and "all tears be wiped from our eyes."]

CCLIV.

THE DESTRUCTION OF AHAB'S FAMILY BY JEHU.

2 Kin. ix. 36. *And he said, This is the word of the Lord, which he spake by his servant Elijah the Tishbite, saying, In the portion of Jezreel shall dogs eat the flesh of Jezebel.*

FROM nothing does the unbeliever receive more solid grounds of conviction, than from the facts recorded in the sacred history. In those facts there is undeniable evidence, that there is a God, who "ordereth all things after the counsel of his own will," and who is particularly "known by the judgments which he executeth." In confirmation of this truth we will shew,

I. How God's word was accomplished in the history before us—

[We lay no stress on the fulfilment of what was spoken to Jehu, because the declaration made to him was the immediate *cause* of his adopting measures for the attainment of the sovereign power. But the accomplishment of God's word in the death of Jehoram and of Jezebel was independent of any human purposes

purposes whatever. The fate that awaited Ahab and Jezebel had long before been announced by the prophet Elijah; though on account of Ahab's repentance, the evil denounced against him, had been deferred, and the fulfilment of the threatening had been reserved for his children. Now it was particularly specified by Elijah to Ahab, that "where dogs had licked the blood of Naboth, they should lick his blood:" and that "dogs should eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel[a]." Behold then how exactly these prophecies were accomplished! Jehoram was at Jezreel: but how came he there? he had gone thither to be healed of the wounds which the Syrians had given him. But why did he not flee from thence, when he saw that Jehu detained the messengers that were sent to ascertain the reason of his approach? He was altogether infatuated; for instead of fleeing, both "he and Ahaziah king of Judah went out, each in his chariot, to meet Jehu," and they actually "met him in the portion of Naboth the Jezreelite[b]," where Jehu drew his bow against Jehoram, and smote him through the heart. And so remarkable was this accomplishment of the Prophet's prediction, that Jehu himself was struck with astonishment at it, and ordered that the corpse should be there exposed to public view, in order that the justice of God, in so requiting the injury done to Naboth, might be manifest to all[c]. The same infatuation seized Jezebel also; for she, when she knew that her son Jehoram was dead, instead of fleeing, or consulting her own safety by submission, insulted Jehu, and was, by his order, thrown out of the window by her own servants, in the very place where God had foretold that death should come upon her. Jehu after some hours bethought him, that as Jezebel, though an accursed woman, was a king's daughter, it was not right to leave her dead body exposed in the streets; and therefore he gave orders that she should be taken up and buried: but, behold, when they came to look for her, nothing of her remained but her scull, and her feet, and the palms of her hands; for the dogs had devoured her: and this singular accomplishment of God's word respecting her, brought again to Jehu's recollection the prediction of Elijah, so minutely verified, not only without any design on his part, but even contrary to his design[d].

An attentive survey of such facts as these is of the greatest use: it convinces us that every word of God must be fulfilled in its season, and that "sooner shall heaven and earth pass away, than one jot or tittle of it should fail."]

From beholding the word of God thus verified in them, let us proceed to notice,

II. How it shall be accomplished sooner or later in the history of us all—

As

[a] 1 Kin. xxi. 19, 23. [b] ver. 21. [c] ver. 26. [d] ver. 36, 37.

As our subject leads us almost exclusively to speak of those who are obnoxious to the Divine threatenings, we shall comprehend them under two classes;

1. Those who make no profession of religion—

[These may differ widely from each other with respect to their external conduct; but in the habit of their minds as alienated from God, and averse to heavenly pursuits, they are all alike; unregenerate, unsanctified, unhumbled. They fear not God: "he is not in all their thoughts:" "they proceed from evil to evil, because they know not God"———We again say, that they do not all commit *the same* iniquities; but they all live as without God in the world———And is not this agreeable to what St. Paul has spoken of the natural man[e]?———Yes verily, his word is fulfilled in every child of Adam. Thus it is with them *in this world.*

Next, let us see how it is with them *in the eternal world.* They go, each at his appointed time, into the presence of their God: but in him they find an angry and an avenging Judge: and from his presence are they driven to reap the just reward of their deeds. They would not, whilst living, regard his threatenings; and therefore they are left to experience the accomplishment of them to all eternity. And is not this precisely according to what the Psalmist has forewarned them of[f]? Has not St. Paul also again and again guarded them against deluding themselves with vain expectations of a different end[g]?———Yes; in all of them will there be scope for precisely the same observation as Jehu made respecting Joram, and Jezebel; "This is the word of the Lord, which he spake by his servants the Prophets."]

2. Those who walk unworthy of their profession—

[Mark the different persons who decline from the ways of God: there is the same variety found amongst them as amongst the carnal and ungodly world: each has his separate pursuit, and each his separate infirmity: but in this all agree; that, whatever be their besetting sin, they are led captive by it more and more; the earthly, the sensual, the devilish, become more and more enslaved by their respective lusts and passions, from the time that they depart from God———And what is this but an accomplishment of that word of Solomon, "The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways[h]?"

Follow them also into the eternal world; and there also you will find that verified, "It had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them[i]." They "have been heaping up treasures indeed for the last days;" but they

[e] Rom. iii. 10—18. & viii. 7. [f] Ps. ix. 17.
[g] 1 Cor. vi. 9. Gal. vi. 7, 8. [h] Prov. xiv. 14. [i] 2 Pet. ii. 21.

they are found to be treasures of wrath, agreeably to that declaration of Elihu, "The hypocrites in heart heap up wrath[k]." The separation predicted by our Lord, takes place; nor do the privileges they enjoyed in this world, or the wonders they performed, avail any thing for the altering of the sentence passed against them[l].]

OBSERVE now from hence,

1. The folly of neglecting the holy Scriptures—

[These contain the whole revealed will of God; and according to these we shall be judged in the last day. What folly is it then not to study them, and to find out beforehand what shall then assuredly come to pass! O let us search them; let us bear in mind whose word is there contained; and let us not rest one single hour in a state that is there condemned.]

2. The evil and danger of unbelief—

[Unbelief "puffs at the word of God," as though it never should come to pass. But can we point out any one declaration of God that has failed of accomplishment? As St. Paul says in reference to the Jews, so may we in reference to the whole world; "What if some did not believe? shall their unbelief make the faith of God of none effect[m]?" Did not God's word "*take hold of* them" at the different periods of their history[n]? Yes, and in us also shall they be fulfilled in their season; nor shall one iota of them ever fall to the ground. The infidels shall "know ere long, whose word shall stand, whether God's or theirs[o]."]

3. The truth and faithfulness of all the promises—

[If the threatenings of God are sure, so also are the promises; nor shall any one of them fail the person who trusts in them. Let us remember, that "in Christ Jesus they are all yea and Amen." Let us lay hold on Christ, and all the promises are ours: we may plead them at the throne of grace; we may rely upon them; we may expect the accomplishment of them; and in that great day, when all the ungodly shall be banished from the presence of their God, we shall have them fulfilled to us in their utmost extent, being put into complete possession of our promised inheritance.]

[k] Job xxxvi. 13. [l] Matt. vii. 21—23. [m] Rom. v. 3.
[n] Compare Zech. i. 6. with Dan. ix. 11—13. [o] Jer. xliv. 28.

CCLV.

THE CHARACTER OF JEHU.

2 Kin. x. 30, 31. *And the Lord said unto Jehu, Because thou hast done well in executing that which is right in mine eyes, and hast done unto the house of Ahab according to all that was in mine heart, thy children of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel. But Jehu took no heed to walk in the law of the Lord God of Israel with all his heart: for he departed not from the sins of Jeroboam, which made Israel to sin.*

WE can scarcely conceive any stronger proof of God's willingness to reward his people, than that which he has given us in rewarding persons, whose services were merely external, without any real love to him in their hearts. If we were to judge from the honour put upon Jehu, we should be ready to suppose he was, if not a blameless, yet, on the whole, a pious character: but on a review of his history, our admiration must be fixed, not on him, but on that infinitely gracious and condescending Being, who was pleased to remunerate such services as his. Let us consider,

I. The character of Jehu—

Here was a mixture, not uncommon in the world. Let us notice,

1. What he did for God—

[Being appointed of God to the office of avenging upon Ahab the blood of Naboth and of the Prophets, he addressed himself to the work without delay. In the space of a few hours he destroyed Jehoram, with his mother Jezebel, and then instantly set himself to complete the work he had so prosperously begun. And it is worthy of observation, that in extirpating the family of Ahab, he succeeded by the very same means which Jezebel had used for the destruction of Naboth. He sent letters to the great men of Samaria, to whose care the seventy sons of Ahab were entrusted, and required of them to cut off their heads in one single night, and send them to him at Jezreel: and these elders, many of whom had doubtless concurred in the shedding of Naboth's blood at the command of Jezebel, now, at the command of Jehu, became traitors to their king, and murderers of all his family.

But, besides cutting off the posterity of Ahab, he proceeded also to execute judgment on all the worshippers of Baal. By a stratagem deeply laid, but ill according with truth or godliness, he

he succeeded against these also in one day; and entirely banished, as it were, the worship of Baal from the land, burning all his images with fire, and making his very temple a draught-house, or sink of all uncleanness.

In this conduct he gained the approbation of Jehonadab, whose pious character and zealous co-operation strengthened and encouraged him in this arduous undertaking. From God himself too did he obtain a decided testimony of approbation, together with a rich reward: for he alone of all the kings of Israel had the kingdom continued to his posterity of the fourth generation, or for so long a period of years.

Thus, it must be confessed, he appears to have been a distinguished servant of the Lord; though, alas! he was but partial in that obedience which he rendered.]

2. What he omitted to do—

[Against Ahab, whom it was his interest to destroy, and Baal, whom he had no wish to preserve, he executed vengeance with zeal; but against the calves of Dan and Bethel, which policy required him to preserve———, he raised not up his hand. Nor indeed did he make the law of God the rule of his conduct: "he took no heed to walk according to that;" much less did he aim at it "with all his heart:" no; he both indulged in himself, and tolerated in others, much that was contrary to the Divine will; and thus he manifested, that, notwithstanding all his outward obedience, his heart was not right in the sight of God.]

Such was his character, externally good, but internally depraved. Let us proceed to notice,

II. The lessons to be deduced from it—

Such characters as these are very instructive: they teach us,

1. That we may perform many outward duties, and yet have no vital principle of religion within us—

[The actions of Jehu, as to *the matter* of them, were good; and therefore they were rewarded; but in *their motive and principle* they were bad; and therefore God afterwards visited them with a severe punishment[a]. This shews, that notwithstanding all he did for the Lord, he had not within him any principle of true piety. And thus it is with multitudes amongst ourselves: they are zealous against open vice and profaneness, yea active too in many works of benevolence, and yet appear evidently to be destitute of vital godliness: they have never been truly humbled before God, never fled to Christ for refuge, never given themselves up to God as his redeemed people——— How much is it to be regretted that such persons, who by their virtues have gained

[a] Hos. i. 4.

gained the admiration and love of the most pious characters, and even received a recompence from the Lord also, should yet, for want of a root of grace in them, never bring forth fruit unto perfection, and never obtain happiness in the eternal world! Like the youth in the Gospel, or Nicodemus, or Paul in his unconverted state, they are zealous towards God to a certain extent, but without a new and spiritual birth must for ever perish. O that all who have a zeal for God in the performance of outward duties, would carefully examine the principles by which they are actuated, and never be satisfied with any action which has not a sense of redeeming love for its moving cause!]

2. That we may profess much zeal for God, and yet have a radical alienation of heart from him—

[Jehu certainly professed to be actuated by a regard for God's honour: "Come, see my zeal for the Lord," said he: and when the different events had taken place, he made reflections upon them as accomplishing the divine predictions. Yet his flagrant neglect of other duties stamped him an hypocrite in the sight of God. And is it not thus with many who make a profession of religion in the present day? They think themselves zealous for God, and wish to be thought so by others: but they are manifestly under the dominion of some reigning lusts, some evil tempers, some hidden abominations. They will sacrifice the refuse to the Lord, and such things as they care but little about; but the choicest of the flocks, and the sins which are more intimately connected with their pleasures or their interests, they will retain. Let professors of religion who are so ardent in talking about their favourite topics, or in attending on the ordinances of religion, inquire, Whether the law of God be really in their hearts; whether they are aspiring after an entire conformity to its commands; and whether they are longing to "stand perfect and complete in all the will of God?" Sad will it be to be numbered among those of whom St. James speaks, who seem to be religious, and yet, by their unbridled tongues, and unsubdued tempers, shew that they "deceive their own selves, and that their religion is vain[b]."]

3. That if ever we would be accepted of God hereafter, we must have our hearts right with him now—

[This is required of every human being[c]. Absolute perfection indeed is not to be expected; but Christian perfection must be attained; nor without it will any conformity to outward rights, or any profession of Christian principles, avail us before God[d]——— But how shall this state of mind be attained? It must be sought by prayer to God, who has promised to give

[b] Jam. i. 26. [c] Deut. x. 12, 13, & xviii. 13. [d] Acts viii. 21.

give us his Holy Spirit, and by the mighty working of that Spirit to bring us to an entire conformity to his will[e]. Plead then with God that blessed promise: yea, give him no rest till he accomplish it to your souls. Then shall your heart be made right with God, as God's is with you; and with infinite condescension will he "take you up to sit with him in the chariot" of his love, and on the throne of his glory[f].]

[e] Ezek. xxxvi. 26, 27. [f] ver. 15.

CLVI.

ELISHA'S REPROOF TO JOASH.

2 Kin. xiii. 18, 19. *And he said, Take the arrows: and he took them. And he said unto the king of Israel, Smite upon the ground: and he smote thrice, and stayed. And the man of God was wroth with him, and said, Thou shouldest have smitten five or six times; then hadst thou smitten Syria, till thou hadst consumed it: whereas now thou shalt smite Syria but thrice.*

IN this passage is recorded a conversation between King Joash and the prophet Elisha. The prophet was dying; and the king, who had utterly neglected him before, now went to visit him, and was full of concern about the loss, which both he and all his people would sustain: the king even wept over him, and most pathetically exclaimed, "O my father, my father! the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof[a]!———Thus it is that the servants of the Lord are too generally treated: they are neglected and despised in their life; but, when they are no longer able to benefit the world, their loss is deeply felt.

On this occasion God put fresh honour upon his servant, and made him a messenger of glad tidings to

[a] This is the same expression as Elisha himself had used in reference to Elijah, 2 Kin. ii. 12. The people of Israel were forbidden to multiply chariots and horses, that they might look to God alone as their strength. And they were now so reduced by Hazael king of Syria, that they had only ten chariots and fifty horsemen left; ver. 7. But if they had attended to Elisha, they would not have needed any such protectors, because God himself would have defended them. This truth the king now acknowledged, feeling that he was about to lose the best support of his kingdom.

to the king. These tidings were conveyed under two symbolical representations; the shooting of an arrow towards Syria, and the smiting of a bundle of arrows upon the ground. But it seems that the king, though apprised of God's gracious intentions towards him, was not by any means either so enlarged in his expectations, or so ardent in his desires, as he should have been: he was lukewarm; and by his lukewarmness he both displeased the Prophet, and deprived himself of a great measure of that mercy which God designed to bestow upon him.

Now this subject affords us a fit occasion to consider,

I. What messages of mercy God has sent to us—

Innumerable are the intimations which God has given us of a glorious deliverance from all our spiritual enemies: they have been given to us,

1. By significant emblems—

[What was the preservation of Noah and his family in the ark, but a representation to us of that deliverance which shall be vouchsafed to all who are found in Christ? All the rest of the world shall perish; but they shall be "saved *in the Lord* with an everlasting salvation[b]." What were the deliverances of God's people from Egypt and Babylon, but typical exhibitions of that redemption which God has vouchsafed to us in Christ Jesus? In this light they are uniformly set forth in the holy Scriptures; and from them we learn never to despair[c]——— What were all the miracles of our Lord, but so many emblems of the spiritual blessings which shall be imparted unto us by the Gospel[d]——— Above all, what was the resurrection of our blessed Lord, but a pledge, yea, a shadowy representation also, of that restoration to a new and spiritual life, of which all shall partake who believe in Christ[e]? ———]

2. By express promises—

[Where shall we begin, or where shall we end, our enumeration of the "exceeding great and precious promises" which are given us in the Gospel? Though we should confine ourselves to the precise idea in the text, and contemplate the promises solely as relating to our deliverance from spiritual enemies, we might easily collect passages almost without number[f]——— These are made,

[b] 1 Pet. iii. 20, 21. [c] Isai. xl. 4, 5.
[d] Isai. xxxv. 5, 6. John ix. 39.
[e] Compare Eph. i. 19—22. with Eph. ii. 4—7.
[f] *Sin*, Rom. vi. 14. *Satan*, Rom. xvi. 20. *Death*, 1 Cor. iii. 22. *Hell*, John iii. 15, 16. or all in one, Luke iv. 18.

made, like that in our text, even to the most unworthy of mankind.]

3. By the declarations and examples of dying saints—

[Behold Jacob on his dying bed[g]; or the aged Simeon with Jesus in his arms[h]: see St. Paul, in daily expectation of martyrdom; how bright his prospects, how heavenly his frame[i]! In such passages as these we see death entirely disarmed of its sting, and the triumphs of heaven, as it were, begun. But we need not go back to the days of old: we may hear for ourselves precisely similar declarations, if we will frequent the chambers of sick and dying saints. In all such instances, the departing saints bring the matter home to our own feelings, and "put, as it were, their hands upon ours," to teach us how to shoot, and to encourage our efforts[k]: and God himself instructs us, what *we* also may expect from him in a dying hour———]

Amidst so many gracious intimations from God, we should inquire,

II. Whence it is that we profit so little by them?

The fault is in ourselves alone, just as it was in the king of Israel—

1. Our desires are faint—

[We do not long for the blessings of redemption as we ought to do: we should "pant after them, as the hart after the water-brooks[l]." But instead of this, we are satisfied with low attainments: and, if we can, as it were, just get within the door of mercy, we have no ambition either to glorify God on earth, or to obtain an augmented weight of glory in heaven. The people of this world put us utterly to shame: *they* are never satisfied: the more they obtain, the more their desires are enlarged. O that it were thus with us; and that we were determined "never to be satisfied, till we awake up after the perfect image of our God[m]!"]

2. Our expectations low—

[We do not actually deny the truth of God in his promises; but we do not view them in their breadth and length, and depth and height. God says to us, "Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it:" but we have no enlargement in prayer. "We are not straitened in him; but we are straitened in our own bowels." God tells us, that "according to our faith it shall be unto us:" but we, instead of raising our expectations in proportion to the ability of the Giver, are ever limiting his power and grace; and on every occasion we

[g] Gen. xlix. 18. [h] Luke ii. 29. [i] 2 Tim. iv. 7, 8.
[k] See ver. 16. [l] Ps. xlii. 1, 2. & lxiii. 1, 2. & lxxxiv. 2.
[m] Ps. xvii. 15.

we ask, *Can* he do this thing? or *Will* he do it for me? This is a fault even amongst eminent saints. It was for this that Jesus reproved the sisters of Lazarus: he had told them, that their brother should rise again: and, when he went to the grave to raise him, they thought that the circumstance of his having been dead four days was an insurmountable obstacle to his restoration to life: but Jesus replied, "Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?" This reproof most justly belongs to us. If when we attended the ordinances of religion, or read the word of God, or opened our mouths in prayer, we really expected such manifestations of God's power and love as he has given us reason to expect, what might we not obtain at his hands? But God does not perform, and, if we may so speak, cannot perform, all that he would for us, because of our unbelief[n].]

3. Our exertions languid—

[When we come into the divine presence, the arrows are, as it were, put into our hands; but we are content with striking twice or thrice. We do not "stir up ourselves to lay hold on God:" we do not wrestle with him, and determine not to let him go, until he has bestowed a blessing on our souls. We should "give him no rest," till he has manifested to us the acceptance of our prayers. But we perform all our duties in so cold a way as rather to offend God by our lukewarmness, than to please him by our zeal. The Prophet was justly displeased with Joash for not shewing greater ardor in the cause of Israel: "Thou shouldest have smitten," says he, "five or six times: then hadst thou smitten Syria, till thou hadst consumed it: whereas now thou shalt smite Syria but thrice." This prediction was exactly verified: "Joash did beat them only three times[o]:" and thus we find it in our own experience: we gain some victories, it is true; but they are only small and partial, because we war not with all our might.——]

ADVICE—

1. Improve the opportunities which God affords you by his Ministers—

[Elisha ministered for above sixty years: yet Joash never availed himself of his instructions, till they were about to be for ever withdrawn. And is it not so wherever the faithful servants of God are sent? The generality, especially of the great and opulent, disregard their warnings, and despise their messages of mercy. O that it might not be found so in this place! If God has sent you the light, learn to walk in the light, whilst you have it; lest darkness come upon you, and "the word which ought

[n] Matt. xiii. 58. with Mark vi. 5. [o] ver. 25.

ought to be a savour of life, become unto you a savour of death."]

2. Trifle not with the impressions which are at any time upon your minds—

[Joash appeared to be now in a hopeful way; but he soon lost his good impressions, and died, as he had lived, an enemy of God. And are there not found amongst us many, whose "goodness is as the morning cloud, and as the early dew that passeth away?" Under the ordinances perhaps, or in a time of sickness, or *under the prospect of some painful bereavement*, you have been affected, and been made willing to obey the voice of God's Prophets: but you have soon forgotten all your vows, and "returned with the dog to his vomit, and with the sow that is washed to her wallowing in the mire." Truly should this be the case with you, "your latter end will be worse than your beginning: for it were better never to have known the way of righteousness, than after having known it to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto you."]

CCLVII.

HEZEKIAH DESTROYS THE BRASEN SERPENT.

2 Kin. xviii. 4. *He brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it. And he called it Nehushtan.*

WE too often see the children of godly parents turning aside from the principles in which they have been educated, and deserting the paths which parental piety has marked out for them. Here we behold a youth, whose father was branded with a special mark of infamy on account of his numerous and aggravated[a] impieties, shining with a brighter lustre than any other of the kings of Judah[b]. No sooner did he come to the throne of his father than he set himself to counteract all the evil which his father had done. At the early age of twenty-five he commenced a reformation, which, for the time at least, was attended with the happiest effects. "He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made." It seems that the veneration

[a] 2 Chron. xxviii. [b] ver. 5, 6.

veneration in which that memorial of God's mercy had been held, had degenerated into the grossest superstition. Where the brasen serpent had been preserved for so long a period, we are not informed. Had it been placed within the sanctuary, with the pot of manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, being concealed from the view both of the people and the priests, it would not have become an object of idolatrous regard. But it is not to be wondered at, that, when idols of every kind were multiplied in the land, this, which as a memorial of God's mercy was really entitled to most affectionate respect, should have divine honours paid to it. The use which was made of it by the Jewish people naturally leads me to shew, *How prone men are to superstition:* whilst the zeal of Hezekiah in destroying it, will properly afford me an occasion yet further to shew, *How earnestly we ought, all of us according to our ability, to counteract the superstition that is around us.*

Observe then,

I. How prone men are to superstition—

Superstition, I am aware, may exist, without being carried to the extent in which it prevailed amongst the Jews at this time. But the same ingredients are found in it, whatever be the degree in which it prevails. In the instance before us its component parts are manifest. The Jews carried their veneration of the brasen serpent to a very culpable excess: they assigned to it a sanctity, which it did not possess—they ascribed to it a glory, which it did not merit—they expected from it a benefit, which it could not confer. Now, whether our superstition have respect to a visible creature, or only to a figment of the brain, its essential qualities are the same; and man in his fallen state is prone to it.

It obtained, and still obtains, universally amongst the heathen—

[What were, or are, the Deities of the heathen, but men, who on account of some exploits in former days have been canonized, or mere creatures of the imagination invested with divine attributes? The Philosophers of Greece and Rome knew of no other

other gods than these; and in that respect were scarcely more rational than any other of the heathen, whether in antient or modern times.]

Amongst the Jews also it ever did, and still does, prevail to an awful extent—

[Scarcely had they been brought out of Egypt before they made a golden calf, and worshipped it as their god[c]. Through their whole abode in the wilderness they bowed down to Moloch and Remphan, the gods of the heathen that were around them[d]. After their settlement in Canaan they evinced the same propensity continually. The greatest mercies which God vouchsafed to them were abused to this end. Was the law given them from Mount Sinai, they rested in it for justification, instead of using it as "a ministration of condemnation," and a rule of life. Was the temple of God among them? in that they trusted as a security against their enemies, saying, as Micah did when he had secured a Levite for his priest, "Now know I that the Lord will do me good, seeing I have a Levite to my priest[e]." Had they the badge of circumcision? they thought that would suffice, though they knew nothing of the true circumcision of the heart. To this present hour the dispersed of Israel have no juster views of God and of religion than those had in former days; of whom it is said, that, trusting in their own righteousness, they would not submit to the righteousness of God. Even the doctrines of man's invention had, and still have, a greater authority over them than the commands of God———]

And what is Popery but a mass of superstition altogether?

[What is the worship of the Virgin Mary, and of Saints, and relics? What are all the masses, the pilgrimages, and the penances that are prescribed among them as means of expiating their sins? What is their auricular confession, their priestly absolution, their adoring of the consecrated wafer, and their administration of extreme unction? Some, I trust, there are, who are enabled to look simply to Christ through all the mists that are cast around him: but those who regard the dogmas of Popery as the only ground of their hopes, are as far from God and truth as either Jews or Heathens.]

Would to God that the Protestant world were blameless in relation to this matter!

[The light which we enjoy ought long since to have dispelled the clouds of popish superstition: but amongst the generality there still remains a most astonishing blindness respecting the Gospel of Christ. How many are there who imagine that repentance has in itself a power to wash away their sins! How many

[c] Acts vii. 41. [d] ib. ver. 42, 43. [e] Judg. xvii. 13. Jer. vii. 4.

many regard the Lord's supper, not as a mere commemorative ordinance in and through which divine blessings are dispensed, but as a sacrificial act, that expiates their guilt, and insures their forgiveness! Baptism, in like manner, is supposed by many to take away our sins, yea, and to renew our natures also, not as it is received, but simply as administered: and they who deny this, are represented as denying the sacramental character of the ordinance. Thus do many amongst ourselves run into the very same absurdity as the Jews did in relation to the brasen serpent. God once conveyed bodily health by a sight of the brasen serpent; and he now conveys spiritual health in and through the ordinance of baptism. But the serpent did not heal *all*, but *those only who looked to it by faith:* nor did it heal them *by any power of its own*, but *only as appointed of God to be a medium of communication from him to them.* When the Jews ascribed the honour to the brasen serpent, and looked to it for future benefits, they erred: and precisely in the same manner do *they* err, who ascribe power to baptism *as an act*, instead of looking simply to God for his blessing on the use of it *as an instituted ordinance, and a medium of communication with him.* As reasonably might any person ascribe the refreshing water which he drinks, to the pipe which conveys it to him, as imagine that the mere act of baptism can justify and sanctify his soul. There is a fountain to which the stream must be traced: and, if we suffer our views to terminate on any thing short of that, we are guilty of the grossest superstition.

In a word, there is in every man by nature a tendency to this fatal evil, and a readiness to rob God of his glory, by giving to the creature that honour which is due to him alone.]

Such is the proneness of man to superstition! and from Hezekiah's conduct we learn,

II. How earnestly we should all endeavour to counteract it—

We should counteract it,

1. In ourselves—

[There is a great deal of this evil remaining in the heart, even after we are truly converted unto God. To view God in every thing; to ascribe every thing, evil as well as good, to God[f], to give him the glory of every thing, and to depend wholly and entirely upon him for every thing, is an attainment to which we are not soon brought: we gain it for the most part by a long and painful discipline. There is a measure of creature-confidence and creature-dependence cleaving to us to the end: or though we be purged from it, yet is there a tendency to return to it, and a necessity to be constantly on our

[f] Am. iii. 6.

our guard against it. Whence is that confidence which some derive from dreams, or visions, or other conceits of their own? Whence is that stress which they lay on the word of God coming to their minds in this or that particular way? It all arises from a propensity inherent in fallen man to rest in something besides God. The word of God is our only legitimate ground of either hope or fear. The manner of its being applied to the mind does not alter one jot or tittle of it. The promises are not a whit more sure because they are presented with force to our minds, nor the threatenings less sure because we are strongly impressed with the idea that they shall never be fulfilled in us. And the only effect of attending to our own feelings in relation to these things is, to generate a presumptuous confidence in some, and groundless apprehensions in others. They all draw the mind from God; and must be guarded against as superstitious vanities: and "all who trust in such vanities, shall have vanity for their recompence."

2. In others—

[Were superstition a harmless delusion, we might leave men to themselves: but when we consider how great an evil it is, and how strenuously the pious Hezekiah opposed it, we should all use our utmost efforts to counteract it in the world. Whether we view the dishonour which it does to God, or the evil which it entails on man, we cannot but see that we should tread in Hezekiah's steps respecting it. That it robs God of his glory, is obvious; because it ascribes to the creature what is due to Him alone. And it is most injurious to man, because whilst it disappoints his hopes, it actually robs him of all the blessings which the Gospel itself provides. What did St. Paul say to those who relied on circumcision as securing or confirming to them the benefits of the Gospel? Did he say, "If ye be circumcised, your *circumcision* shall profit you nothing?" No: but, "If ye be circumcised, CHRIST shall profit you nothing[g]." And so must we say in reference to superstition of every kind: it not only fails to procure the benefits it aspires to, but actually deprives us of the benefits we might otherwise obtain: and it would be well if those, who superstitiously regard divine ordinances, whether baptism, or the Lord's supper, or any other ordinance, as possessing any inherent virtue in themselves, and as imparting virtue by any power of their own, would contemplate their guilt and danger whilst under the influence of such delusions: for to those who against better light adhere to them, as necessarily conveying justification and sanctification and salvation, "Christ himself will become of no effect:" they are fallen from grace; and, as far as respects them, "Christ is dead in vain[h]."

Well I know that to some these sentiments will appear harsh: but

[g] Gal. v. 2. [h] ib. ver. 4. with Gal. ii. 21.

but fidelity to God and man requires, that, if even an angel from heaven should countenance such an error, he should be opposed[1]. And if in opposing such errors any one think that we manifest too much zeal, what would such an one have said to Hezekiah? 'Hezekiah, know ye not that that serpent was appointed as an ordinance by God himself? Know ye not how many thousands were healed by it? And do you dare to break it in pieces, and to degrade it with such an appellation as "*Nehushtan*," as though it were no better than a mere *piece of brass*? I am shocked at your impiety.' But what would Hezekiah have said? 'It is not *as an ordinance of God* that I degrade it, but as idolatrously substituted in God's place, as a ground of hope, and as a source of good.' So say I of baptism and of the Lord's supper: "In their proper and appointed use they cannot be too highly valued: but, if abused to purposes for which they were not given, and looked to as containing in themselves, and conveying of themselves, salvation to man, they are desecrated, and may justly be called "*Nehushtan*." So Paul said in relation to circumcision, which corresponds with the Christian ordinance of baptism. When some abused it as a ground of hope, he would not acknowledge them as the people of God. He indignantly denominates them "the concision," declaring that *they* only were the circumcision who sought their salvation in God alone. And, if any be offended with this doctrine, we refer them to Hezekiah; we refer them to St. Paul. It is too weighty a matter to be trifled with, seeing that it is of vital importance to every soul of man.]

Let us LEARN then from hence,

1. How to use God's ordinances—

[We should be thankful for them: we should honour them: we should look to God in them, and expect from God through them the communications of his grace and peace. They are to be reverenced, but not idolized; to be used as means, but not rested in as an end. No one is to imagine himself the better, merely because he has attended on any ordinances: for he may eat his own condemnation at the supper of the Lord, and have the word which is ministered unto him "a savour only of death." We must look, not to ordinances, but to God in them: and just so much as we obtain from God in them are we benefited by them. This present ordinance for instance; What are you the better for it, if you have not held communion with God himself in your devotions? And what benefit will you receive from the word now delivered, if it come not to you in demonstration of the Spirit and of power? Bear this in mind, both before you come up to the house of God, and when you depart from it; and then you will find the ordinances to be blessings indeed.

But

[1] Gal. i. 8, 9.

But, if you "sacrifice to your own net, and burn incense to your own drag[k]," your coming hither will be in vain, and our labour also will be in vain.]

2. How to regard the Lord Jesus Christ himself—

[Methinks these Jews, though so blind and sinful, may well rise up in judgment against the generality of the Christian world. The serpent which they worshipped had never done any thing for them; the persons whom it had healed, had lived 800 years before; and it prevailed only to prolong for a season their corporeal life: and no benefit had accrued from it to any child of man since the day that it was erected *in* the camp. Yet they honoured it, and "offered incense to it." But the Lord Jesus Christ has been healing immortal souls; and *that* from the foundation of the world to this present hour; and so healed them, that they should live for ever. This too he has done, not by being unconsciously and without volition suspended on the cross; but by voluntarily leaving his Father's bosom, and assuming our nature, and dying on the cross under the load of all our sins, and drinking to the very dregs that cup of bitterness which must otherwise have been put into our hands to drink for ever. Yet how many days and months and years have been spent by most of us without ever offering to him the incense of our prayers and praise! Yea, notwithstanding he is erected for the healing of us, and is at this moment empowered to bestow on us all the blessings that we can need for body or for soul, for time or for eternity, how little is he adored and magnified by us! May we not well be ashamed when we reflect on this? May we not be confounded when we compare our treatment of him with the conduct of the Jews towards the senseless shadowy representation of him? Yes indeed; we have reason to blush and be confounded before him. Let us then repent of all our ingratitude towards him. Let us remember that there is no fear of honouring him too much, since He is God, as well as man; and not the medium of communication only, but the true and proper source of all blessings to our souls. Then shall our communion with him be sweet: and "the golden oil shall flow through the golden pipes[l]" of his ordinances, from Him the fountain of it, to the enriching of our souls with all spiritual blessings, and to the everlasting glory of his great and glorious name.]

[k] Hab. i. 16. [l] Zech. iv. 11—14.

CCLVIII.

HEZEKIAH'S DELIVERANCE FROM SENNACHERIB.

2 Kin. xix. 30, 31. *The remnant that is escaped of the house of Judah shall yet again take root downward, and bear fruit upward: for out of Jerusalem shall go forth a remnant, and they that escape out of Mount Zion: the zeal of the Lord of Hosts shall do this.*

GREAT and mighty conquerors have at all times been ready to ascribe their success to their own wisdom and prowess: but in no case have they been any thing more than the sword which God has used for the effecting of his own purposes[a]: and when he has accomplished by them his own designs, he not unfrequently punishes their pride and cruelty by some signal judgments. Thus he acted towards the boasting and blasphemous Sennacherib. He raised up that monarch to subdue mighty kingdoms, to lead into captivity the ten tribes of Israel, and to inflict a heavy chastisement on the two remaining tribes of Judah and Benjamin. But, when the victorious monarch arrogated to himself all the glory of his conquests, and poured contempt upon Jehovah, whose instrument he was, God "put a hook in his nose and a bridle in his jaws," and turned him back with shame and ignominy; assuring at the same time his oppressed people, that, notwithstanding their present weakness, they should speedily be delivered from their insulting foe, and again be raised to stability and honour.

The words which we have now read are a part of the answer given from the Lord to the supplications of Hezekiah: and we shall find it not unprofitable to consider,

I. The promise contained in them—

[The tribes of Judah and Benjamin were reduced to the lowest state of desperation. But God had yet mercy in store for them; and promised, that he would once more establish them in peace and prosperity, so that, instead of being shut up, as now they were, they should be at liberty to return to their own possessions;

[a] Isai. x 5, 15.

possessions; and, instead of being reduced in number, they should multiply and fill the land.

This seems to be the primary meaning of the words: but they undoubtedly contain a promise of spiritual prosperity to that nation in the Apostolic age.

The terms in which the promise is expressed, are taken from the preceding verse; wherein it is declared, for their comfort, that the desolation which Sennacherib's army had occasioned, should not issue in a famine; but that sufficient corn should spring up, from what had been spilled in the fields, to support them this year, and the year following (which was the sabbatic year); and that in the third year they should be supported by the labours of husbandry, as in former times. From thence God takes occasion to say, that the remnant which should escape the present desolations, should at a future period be a source of comfort and benefit to the whole world.

That this is the true meaning of the words, appears from similar expressions used by the prophet Isaiah, and quoted by St. Paul in the very sense here affixed to them[b]. In preserving a remnant, it was God's intention that they should be witnesses for him to every nation under heaven; and that by the ministration of his Gospel they should "blossom, and bud, and fill the face of the world with fruit[c]."

The events which took place in the Apostolic age, when the Apostles and others went forth to publish the glad tidings of salvation, precisely corresponded with this prophecy: they went from Jerusalem, and diffused the knowledge of a crucified Saviour throughout the earth.]

Let us attend to,

II. The instruction to be derived from it—

We may particularly learn from hence,

1. The interest which God takes in his Church and people—

[Not only from the time that these words were spoken, but even before the foundation of the world, God had an eye to his chosen people, to deliver them from their spiritual enemies, that they might "walk in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of their life." On his Jewish Church he yet looks, in order to "engraft them yet again on their own olive-tree," when the appointed period for their restoration shall arrive. And on the least and meanest of his people does he still cast an eye of love and pity: he "has thoughts of love and peace towards them," and "is not willing that one of his little ones should perish." If enemies assault them, he considers himself as struck through them[d]: he feels as if the apple of his eye were touched[e]: he regards

[b] Compare Isai. x. 21, 22. with Rom. ix. 27.
[c] Isai. xxvii. 6. [d] Acts ix. 4. [e] Zech. ii. 8.

regards them as "his first-fruits," which if any dared to alienate and consume, he did it at the peril of his own soul[f].]

2. The efficacy of believing prayer—

[Low indeed was the state of the nation at that time: it seemed as if there was no possibility of escape for them from their conquering enemies. But behold, how speedily and effectually prayer prevailed! Isaiah lifted up his voice to God in prayer[g]; Hezekiah also spread before the Lord the letter that Rabshakeh had sent him[h]; and scarcely had the pious monarch finished his prayer, before the Prophet was sent to him from the Lord, with assurances of immediate and complete deliverance[i]: and that very night was an angel sent from heaven to destroy 185,000 of the Assyrian army. Thus shall all God's enemies, and ours, perish, if only we cry unto God for help. We may even now adopt the exulting language which God ordered Hezekiah to use in reference to the Assyrian monarch, "The virgin, the daughter of Israel, hath shaken her head at thee." Only spread all your wants and difficulties before the Lord, and there is no lust, no enemy, that shall stand before you; but "Satan himself shall be bruised under your feet shortly."

"The zeal of the Lord of Hosts is pledged to perform this" for all his believing people. You may therefore go to him and plead, "Where is thy *zeal*, and thy strength, the sounding of thy bowels and of thy mercies towards me[k]?" And his answer to you shall speedily arrive, "I will rejoice over you to do you good, and I will plant you in the heavenly land *with my whole heart and with my whole soul*[l]." Only believe in him; and "according to your faith it shall be unto you."]

[f] Jer. ii. 3. [g] ver. 4. [h] ver. 14—19. [i] ver. 20.
[k] Isai. lxiii. 15. [l] Jer. xxxii. 41.

CCLIX.

HEZEKIAH'S APPEAL TO GOD.

2 Kin. xx. 2, 3. *Then he turned his face to the wall, and prayed unto the Lord, saying, I beseech thee, O Lord, remember now how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight.*

AS "clouds return after rain," so do troubles follow each other frequently in rapid succession.—Great was the affliction of Hezekiah at the time of Sennacherib's invasion: and no sooner was he delivered from that, than he was attacked with a deadly malady, and had a message from the Lord that he must

must die[a]. Under this new trouble he betook himself, as he had done also on the former occasion, to fervent prayer: and in this prayer he made a most solemn appeal to God, an appeal which needs to be well considered.

We will notice,

I. The occasion of it—

A message had been sent him from the Lord to set his house in order, and to prepare for speedy death.

Now this would be an awful warning to any man—

[There is in every man an instinctive dread of death; and more especially to those who regard it in its true light. Who can think of going to the tribunal of a just and holy God, to give an account of all that he has done in the body, whether good or evil, and to receive from God a sentence of everlasting happiness or misery, and not tremble at such a prospect? ——— This thought is as interesting to the prince as the peasant ——— and though many persons treat it as fit only to be regarded by the poor, or by the sick and aged, yet, when the hour of death draws nigh, all feel its importance; or, if any are hardened enough to disregard it then, their delusion ceases the very instant that death has executed on them its commission ———]

But it was peculiarly distressing to Hezekiah—

[He had begun a great and glorious Reformation, and had fondly hoped to see it completed in the land. Besides, he had many plans for the temporal prosperity of his subjects; which now he had no prospect of carrying into execution. To relinquish all these projects was painful in the extreme. It evidently was not the mere fear of death that stimulated him to pray: nor does he appear to have entertained any doubt about the safety of his own soul: it was for God, and for the Jewish nation, that he felt concerned: and doubtless, in proportion to his zeal for God, and the love he bore to man, would be his grief at the tidings of such a premature and unseasonable termination of his life: nor do we wonder that under such circumstances he should "make supplication to his God with strong crying and tears."]

Yet, till it is explained, we shall not easily account for,

II. The

[a] There appears no just reason for transposing these two events; for they certainly might easily occur within the space of one year: and it is not right to take such liberties with Scripture, as that of transposing chapters and events, without strong internal evidence of the necessity of such a change.

II. The appeal itself—

It does at first sight appear like the Pharisaic boast, "I thank thee, O God, that I am not as other men." But, in truth, it was a *plea*, with which his prayer was enforced; a plea, like that of David, "Preserve my soul, for I am holy[b]." In this appeal he humbly declared before God,

1. The use which he had hitherto made of life—

[From the first moment of his coming to the throne, he had set himself to suppress idolatry, and to reform the nation. Of this he had the testimony of his own conscience; and this gave him much comfort in his soul[c], together with confidence in urging his petitions before God[d].

But there was in this plea a reference to an express promise made to David, a promise, the accomplishment of which Hezekiah was now particularly authorized to ask, and to expect. God had assured Daivd that "if his children should walk before him in truth, there should not fail one of them to sit upon the throne of Israel[e]." But Hezekiah had walked before God in truth, and yet was about to die without leaving any child to succeed him in his throne[f]. This under any circumstances would have been a great affliction; but it was peculiarly afflictive, now that Hezekiah was in the midst of all his plans for the welfare of the nation, and had no prospect of a successor who would carry them on. Hence there was a propriety in this appeal, far beyond what has been generally supposed: for if we have complied with any conditions on which a promise is suspended, we may justly urge it with God as a plea for the accomplishment of his promise.]

2. The end for which he desired a continuance of life—

[His desire was, not that he might have a protracted enjoyment of earthly things, but that he might have further opportunities of serving God. This appears from the thanksgiving which he uttered on his recovery[g]. And this was a legitimate ground of desiring life. St. Paul, though he "desired to depart and to be with Christ, which was far better," yet was willing to stay a longer time here below, because it was "needful for the Church of Christ." What better plea then could be urged than this? 'O my God, thou hast put me into a situation wherein I can serve thee to great advantage; and thou knowest I have no desire but to advance thy glory in the world: O take me not away, till I have been enabled to render thee all the service of which

[b] Ps. lxxxvi. 2. [c] 2 Cor. i. 12. [d] 1 John iii. 21, 22. [e] 1 Kin. ii. 4.
[f] Manasseh was not born till three years afterwards. Compare 2 Kin. xx. 6. with xxi. 1. [g] Isai. xxxviii. 18, 19.

which thou hast made me capable!' Such was David's plea [h]; and it may well be urged by all who desire to fulfil the true ends of life.]

ADDRESS—

1. Those who are in health and strength—

[Who can tell, how soon the message may be sent to you, "Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die and not live." You may be in the prime of life, as Hezekiah was; (he was only forty years of age;) or, like him, may possess great wealth and honour; or may be engaged in pursuits of vast utility to the world; but death will not spare us on any of these accounts, if it has received its commission to cut us down. Inquire then whether, if the message were now delivered unto you, "Thou shalt die, and not live," you are ready to give up your account with joy? Can you appeal to the heart-searching God that you have walked as in his presence, and endeavoured with sincerity of heart to approve yourselves to him? Has the doing of his will in all things been the one object of your life? Above all, inquire whether Christ has been precious to you? whether you have lived by faith on him? and whether you have truly devoted yourselves to his service? These are the things that characterize a true Christian; and unless you have the testimony of your conscience that you have made this use of life, you have indeed very abundant cause to be afraid of death. O pray to God that you may not be taken away in such an unprepared state; and lose not a moment in seeking that entire change of heart and life, without which you can never have any well-grounded confidence towards God.]

2. Those who have recovered from sickness, or have escaped any particular danger—

[Why has God spared or restored you, but that you might live henceforth to his glory? Perhaps under the apprehension of death, you determined with yourselves that you would give yourselves up to God. Now then remember the vows that are upon you. God heard your prayer, and the prayers of others for you, that it might be seen whether you would serve him or not. O beware how you abuse his patience and long-suffering towards you: beware how you make use of life only to "add sin to sin," and to "treasure up wrath against the day of wrath." There is a great work lying before you, and but little time to do it in. To have the text realized in you, to have it realized in all its parts ——— and to have such an evidence of it in your heart and life, as to be able to appeal to God respecting it; this is no easy matter; nor is it a work that ought to be deferred one single moment. Consider, you are still as much exposed to death as ever. Though restored, you have no promise of life for fifteen

[h] Ps. xxx. 8, 9.

fifteen years to come, no, nor for fifteen days or hours. Improve then the present hour: "Walk not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time," that at whatever hour the heavenly Bridegroom may arrive, you may be found ready, and be counted worthy to sit down with him at his marriage-feast in heaven.]

CCLX.

HEZEKIAH'S RESIGNATION.

2 Kin. xx. 19. *Then said Hezekiah unto Isaiah, Good is the word of the Lord which thou hast spoken.*

IF of active virtues it may be said, that they are more fascinating and beautiful in the eyes of men; of passive virtues it may be said, that an equal degree of divine grace is displayed in them. It is as much an effect of divine grace to suffer patiently the will of God, as it is to perform it diligently. Accordingly we find, that most of the eminent saints of old were as remarkable for a meek submission to the divine disposals, as for a zealous execution of the divine commands. Aaron[a], Eli[b], Job[c], David[d], and many others, are recorded as bright examples of the passive graces: and the history of Hezekiah, as contained in the words before us, furnishes us with an admirable specimen of pious resignation.

We shall consider his resignation,

I. As an act of piety—

The judgments denounced against his family and kingdom were of the most distressing nature—

[All the wealth that he possessed, together with the holy city and temple, were to be delivered into the hands of the Chaldeans; and his sons, whom he should beget, should be made eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon. To a monarch, what could be more distressing than the overthrow of his whole kingdom? To a pious monarch, what more grievous than the destruction of God's temple, and the triumph of idolatry over the true religion? And to a monarch that was a parent, what more terrible than such degradation and misery as were denounced against his offspring?

Some may think that these judgments were not very afflicting, because they were not to affect the king himself, but only to attach

[a] Lev. x. 3. [b] 1 Sam. iii. 18. [c] Job i. 21. [d] Ps. xxxix. 9.

attach upon his descendants: but, we apprehend that any *personal* affliction whatever would have been esteemed light, in comparison of the calamities here threatened[e].]

Yet were the tidings of them received with the most perfect submission—

[What could any man say more? Hezekiah justified in the strongest terms the denunciations that had been delivered. Though he was taken entirely off his guard, and had not the smallest expectation of any such message from the Lord, yet, on the delivery of it, he bowed at once, and "accepted it as the punishment of his iniquity[f]." Grievous as the chastisement was, he *approved of it* as coming from the hands of a righteous God, and declared it to be not only just, but "good."]

Instead of murmuring against God for the severity of his judgments, he instantly expressed his gratitude for the mercy blended with them—

[He was informed that in *his* days the nation should enjoy "peace;" and that "truth" should triumph over the idolatry and wickedness which had overrun the land. These considerations, independent of his own *personal* welfare, were consolatory to his mind; because, if God had been "extreme to mark what had been done amiss," he might have justly executed his threatened judgments instantly, without any intervention of grace and mercy. On these mitigated circumstances Hezekiah fixed his mind; and, whilst he acknowledged the equity of the judgments in their fullest extent, he more especially adored the goodness of God in suspending them for so long a period: "Is it not good, if peace and truth be in my days?" The prospect of the prevalence of true religion, though but for a season, was cheering to him: and he "accounted the long-suffering of God to be salvation."]

If, as an act of piety, we admire his resignation, much more shall we do so,

II. As a lesson of instruction—

Truly in this view the history before us is very important. From it we learn many valuable lessons:

1. That pride, however light and venial it may appear in our eyes, is most offensive in the sight of God—

[It was *pride* which led Hezekiah to display before the Babylonish ambassadors all the monuments of his wealth and power: he felt an undue complacency in the things themselves, as though they of themselves could make us happy; and next, he relied

[e] See 2 Sam. xxiv. 17. [f] Lev. xxvi. 41.

relied on them as inducements to the king of Babylon to court his alliance. According to the common estimation of men, there would be no great evil in this conduct: but God regarded as a very heinous sin, the indulgence of such vain conceits; and marked the extent of his displeasure by the severity of his judgments.

Let not any one then imagine that an inordinate attachment to earthly things, or a vain confidence in them, is a light offence. Whatever we have that distinguishes us from our fellow-creatures, it is given us of the Lord; and, instead of engrossing our affections, it should lead us to him in thankfulness and praise. If we take glory to ourselves for our possession of it, we provoke him to jealousy, and excite his indignation against us. How highly did God resent the pride of Nebuchadnezzar[g], and of Herod[h]! And shall we escape, if we "provoke the Lord to jealousy?" Let us be thankful for what we possess; but let our affections centre in God alone.]

2. That just views of sin will lead us to justify God in all the judgments that are denounced against it—

[We are ready to think that the punishment inflicted on Hezekiah was more severe than the occasion required: but he thought not so, because he saw his sin in all its malignity——— In like manner, when the everlasting displeasure of God is denounced against sin and sinners, the proud heart of man is ready to rise up against God, and to say, that it would not be just to inflict eternal punishment for the sins of time, especially if those sins have not been of the most flagrant kind. But a just view of our demerit silences at once all those rebellious murmurs. We then say with David, "Thou art justified in thy saying, and wilt be clear when thou judgest." It is remarkable, that the man who was cast out for not having on the wedding garment, is represented as not having one word to utter in arrest of judgment; "he was speechless[i]:" and so will it be with all at the last day, yea and with all in this life also, who are made sensible of their iniquities. Under the deepest of earthly afflictions they will say, "Shall a living man complain? a man for the punishment of his sins?" No; "I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him." Under the apprehension of his eternal displeasure also they will cry, "I have sinned against Heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son."

Let us beg of God then to give us an insight into our own wickedness; that under all circumstances we may approve of God as "doing all things well."

3. That

[g] Dan. iv. 29—33. [h] Acts xii. 22, 23. [i] Matt. xxii. 12.

3. That a humble mind will be more thankful for the mitigating circumstances of an affliction than querulous about the affliction itself—

[We greatly admire this in the history before us. And who does not see what sweet composure such conduct is calculated to bring into the mind? The generality of persons are ready to fix on every circumstance that can aggravate their affliction; and hence they make themselves far more miserable than they would otherwise be: but if, like Hezekiah, they looked on the brighter side of their troubles, and noticed the mercies with which they were blended, they would be comparatively happy under them. Even self-love might dictate such a line of conduct, if we were actuated by no better motive: for, if once we saw, how much more afflictive our circumstances might have been, and how much heavier judgments we have merited, we should feel gratitude rise up in our bosoms, and "bless our God, no less when he takes away, than when he gives:" we should confess it to be "of the Lord's mercies that we are not utterly consumed."]

CCLXI.

THE BENEFITS ARISING FROM PEACE AND TRUTH. *

2 Kin. xx. 19. *Is it not good, if peace and truth be in my days?*

BY many it is thought that a knowledge of futurity would contribute to their happiness: but we are persuaded that it would prove only a source of misery: the good that would be foreseen would lose more than half its zest, whilst the evil that was anticipated would embitter the remainder of their days. It was as a punishment, and not as a favour, that an insight into futurity was given to king Hezekiah. He had displeased the Lord by his conduct towards the ambassadors of the king of Babylon: and God sent him word what calamities should befal both his family and nation through the instrumentality of that monarch. This judgment however was tempered with mercy; the execution of it being deferred to generations yet unborn. Hence the judgment was submitted to with pious resignation: "Good is the word of the Lord which thou hast spoken. Is it not good, if peace and truth be in my days?"

It

* Thanksgiving for Peace.

It is not our intention to enter any further into the Jewish history than just to fix the precise import of our text. The text is applicable to all persons in every age, and particularly so to this present season. We shall therefore take occasion from them to shew,

I. What blessings God is now conferring upon us—

What we are to understand by "peace and truth" will be best seen by a reference to the preceding context—

[God had declared that the king of Babylon should invade Judea, and take all the wealth of Hezekiah for a prey, and carry captive his children, and entirely destroy the whole Jewish polity. But, inasmuch as these judgments should be deferred, Hezekiah, instead of beholding the subjugation and captivity of his children, should have "peace;" and, instead of seeing the abolition of the temple worship, should have "truth" continued to him.]

Now these are the very blessings for which we are peculiarly called to render thanks this day—

[*Peace* is now happily once more restored: and such a peace as places our country in a state of greater security than it has ever enjoyed since it became a nation — — —

"Truth" also, with an undisturbed enjoyment of all religious ordinances, is now secured to us. We are no longer in danger of having the temples of our God converted into barracks for a licentious soldiery, or magazines for the implements of war. No longer have we any reason to fear lest a victorious enemy should deprive us of our religious liberty, or a yoke of superstition be imposed upon us as the only worship tolerated in the land. Blessed be God! we enjoy the Gospel in all its purity; and every man thoughout the whole land is permitted to serve his God in the way that seems to him to be most agreeable to the Divine commands — — —]

Such blessings being now insured to us, let us consider,

II. In what light they should be viewed—

The continuance of them to Hezekiah was deemed by him a mercy, a great and *undeniable* mercy: "Is it not good, if peace and truth be in my days?" To us then is the possession of them,

1. A rich mercy—

[How rich a mercy "peace" is, we, who have never had our

our country the seat of war, are but ill qualified to judge. It is our happiness indeed that we cannot judge of it; since it can only be known by an experience of those calamities which war brings in its train.

Nor can we adequately conceive how much we are indebted to God for the possession of "truth." To estimate this aright, we should behold all the degrading superstitions of heathen nations, and see what self-tormenting methods they practise for the obtaining of peace with their senseless deities of wood and stone. We should see also how the far greater part of those who call themselves Christians are blinded by ceremonies of man's invention, and debarred the use of those sacred oracles which are "able to make them wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Some sense, we trust, many of us have of the value of a Saviour, through whom the vilest of sinners find access to God, and obtain all the blessings of grace and glory. But we must go up to heaven and behold the felicity of the Saints made perfect: and go down to hell to behold the miseries of the damned, before we can fully appreciate that Gospel, by which we are quickened from death in trespasses and sins, and are "translated from the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of God's dear Son."]

2. An undeserved mercy—

[Hezekiah felt that he might justly have been deprived of these blessings, and been made to experience in his own person all the calamities which were denounced against him in his posterity. And what was Hezekiah's fault? It was this: that when the ambassadors came to congratulate him on his recovery from a dangerous illness, he neglected to commend to them the God of Israel, by whom their souls, and the souls of their countrymen, might be saved; and sought rather to aggrandize himself by an ostentatious display of his own wealth and power. Now we are far from wishing to extenuate his guilt: it was doubtless exceeding great: and the pride of his heart merited from God the severest chastisement[a]. But what was his guilt compared with ours? We scarcely hear on any occasion the glory of our successes ascribed to God; nor do we find one in a thousand who relies truly and simply on God for a continuance of them: self-glorying, and confidence in an arm of flesh, are the leading features of our whole people; so that we might justly have been left to experience defeats answerable to all our victories. And how is the "truth" improved amongst us? As, on the one hand, there is not a nation under heaven where it shines with purer lustre, so neither, on the other hand, is there a nation under heaven where it is treated with greater contempt. And as to those who profess to value it, how little are

[a] 2 Chron. xxxii. 25, 26.

are its fair and beauteous lineaments visible in their hearts and lives! Well indeed might our misimprovement of the light have long since provoked God to "take away his candlestick from us:" and it is a most unmerited mercy that "the glorious Gospel of the blessed God" is yet continued to us.]

3. A mercy that may well reconcile us to all events connected with it—

[We are not to suppose that Hezekiah was indifferent about the welfare of his posterity: it was nothing but his sense of the greatness of the mercy vouchsafed to him, that led him to acquiesce so meekly in the sentence as it was denounced against him. The prospect of the calamities that would come on his posterity was doubtless a source of bitter anguish to his mind: but it was a great matter that he had obtained a respite, and that the judgment was not inflicted instantly upon him. This favour therefore he acknowledged as a mercy, which might well compose and tranquillize his mind.

Now it is certain that the blessings which we enjoy are far from coming without alloy. They will, it is to be feared, prove in the issue a source of misery to many. The peace, which leads to the disbanding of so many thousand troops, will leave multitudes in a state unfavourable to their best interests. Many will find it difficult to return to the employment of honest industry; yea perhaps may find it difficult even to get employment: and many who in the scenes of war have been accustomed to blood and pillage, may bring home with them a disposition to exercise amongst their brethren the same evil habits which they deemed allowable amongst their enemies: and thus our domestic security may be invaded, and the perpetrators of these crimes be subjected to an untimely death by the hands of the public executioner. This is an evil felt at the termination of every war: yet must it by no means indispose us to acknowledge the blessings of peace.

The very truth of God also, even the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, brings on many, through their rejection of it, an heavier condemnation. Good would it have been for many, if they had never heard the Gospel; yea good, if Jesus Christ had never come into the world to save our ruined race. It was declared at the very time that he did come, that "he was set for *the fall*, as well as for *the rising again*, of many in Israel[b]:" and that, though he should be "a sanctuary to some, he should prove to others a stumbling stone and a rock of offence[c]." Thus does the Gospel itself, that greatest gift of God to mankind, "become to some a savour of life unto life, but to others a savour of death unto death[d]." Still however we must not suffer these things to diminish our value for the Gospel. If some abuse their food to intemperance, we must not therefore be unthankful for

[b] Luke ii. 34. [c] Isai. viii. 14. [d] 2 Cor. ii. 16.

for our food: nor if men abuse the Gospel, must we impute it to any defect in the Gospel, but to the depravity of their own hearts, which turns the blessing into a curse.

We say then, that whatever evils may, by accident, be connected with the blessings we have received, *even though those evils should fall upon our own children*, it becomes us to adore and magnify our God that those blessings are not withheld from us, but that we are privileged to possess them in our days.]

4. A mercy which should be gratefully and diligently improved—

[A state of peace, and a quiet enjoyment of Gospel ordinances, is extremely favourable for the attainment of vital godliness. So it proved to the Christian Church in its infant state[e]; and so it will be to us. Do we ask, In what way we should improve the present occasion? We answer, In the way that David and Solomon improved their circumstances, when God had favoured them with the blessings which are now conferred on us. David bethought him, What can I do for God? I will build him an house that shall be worthy of his divine Majesty[f]. Solomon also adopted precisely the same resolution under the same circumstances[g]. The same holy zeal should now inflame our hearts. We are not indeed called to build for the Lord an house of wood and stone, but a house of "living stones," that shall be "an habitation of God through the Spirit" to all eternity. O see what myriads of stones there are lying in the quarry of corrupt nature, that through your instrumentality may be formed and fashioned to build the temple of the Lord. Look at the blind obdurate sons of Abraham, and see what may be done to bring them to the knowledge of that Saviour whom they have crucified. Look at the Gentile world, all lying in darkness and the shadow of death; and see what may be done for the enlightening of their minds, and for the saving of their souls alive. To employ our time, and property, and talents, according as God shall give us opportunity, in such works, will be the best return that we can make to God for the light and peace that we enjoy: and, if we exert ourselves diligently in these labours of love, verily we shall have reason to all eternity to say, "Was it not good, that peace and truth were in our days?"]

[e] Acts ix. 31. [f] 2 Sam. vii. 1, 2. [g] 1 Kin. v. 4, 5.

CCLXII.

COVENANTING WITH GOD.

2 Kin. xxiii. 3. *And the king stood by a pillar, and made a covenant before the Lord, to walk after the Lord, and to keep his commandments, and his testimonies, and his statutes, with all their heart, and all their soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book: and all the people stood to the covenant.*

LITTLE do men in general consider the benefit they receive from the sacred oracles, and the stated ordinances of Divine worship. Without these, the remembrance of God would soon vanish: whereas by these we are constantly reminded of the obligations we are under to love and serve him. In the days of king Josiah the inspired volume was altogether lost, and the Temple of Jehovah had been suffered to fall into decay. The pious monarch having ordered the temple to be repaired, the book of God was found. Immediately the contents of it were read to him: and, when he saw what judgments it denounced against his nation, he sought to avert them by turning to the Lord his God. He summoned all the priests, and prophets, and people of Jerusalem, and engaged them to make a solemn covenant with God, that they would henceforth serve him with their whole heart.

This instructive record shews us, that,

I. Persons in authority should use their influence to promote religion—

[Many of the Jewish kings were patrons of real piety: but among them all there was not one who equalled Josiah in integrity of heart and devotedness of soul[a]. The use which he made of his authority is sufficiently declared in the history before us. But we must not imagine that such exertions belong only to Rulers and Governors: whether our influence extend over a kingdom, or only to a parish, or a single family, it should be improved for God. Ministers should labour by all possible means to bring their people to God: and every Parent, or Master of a family, should study to advance the eternal interest of those, who by the providence of God are committed to their care. Nor should any be deterred by the degeneracy of the times: for the state

[a] ver. 25.

state of religion cannot well be reduced to a lower ebb than it was in the days of Josiah: and, if it were, that would only be a reason for our more earnest exertions in the cause of God. Nor can we easily conceive how much good might be done by the labours of an individual. The effects of Josiah's reformation continued throughout all his reign[b]: and, though persons in inferior stations cannot hope to produce the sudden and extensive change that he did, yet their labours may convey incalculable benefit to the latest generations: the good impressions that are made on a few will stimulate them to impart the same benefits to their neighbours, and to seek the welfare of those who are within the sphere of their influence: those again will adopt the same line of conduct towards others; and thus the benefit will be perpetually transmitted from age to age. What might not be hoped for, if Magistrates and Ministers, parents and masters, would combine in this good work?]

To this we may be encouraged, by the consideration that,

II. Such exertions will be acceptable to those who feel their need of mercy—

[They who are wholly unconcerned about their souls will probably regard such efforts as officious, ostentatious, hypocritical. But if once they become, like the Jews on this occasion, sensible of their guilt and danger, they will no longer consider a Reformer as an enemy to the happiness of mankind, but as a blessing to the world. How often is it seen that they who once despised and persecuted a Minister for his piety, will send for him in a time of sickness, and be exceeding thankful for his instructions and his prayers! and many who once joined in condemning him for his zeal, will afterwards go statedly many miles to attend his Ministry. Such is the effect even among strangers and aliens: how much more therefore may we hope to find this acquiescence, when our counsels are enforced with the endearments of affection, or the weight of legitimate authority! Indeed, such interference is expected of us: and we lower ourselves in the estimation even of the ungodly, in proportion as we decline, whether through indolence or fear, these offices of Christian love.]

Such exertions, I say, will be acceptable to many;

III. Nor will the strictest commands of God's covenant be deemed harsh by those who are in earnest about their souls—

[Men regardless of their eternal state will scarcely hear of any restraint: they will plead for the utmost latitude of indulgence:

[b] 2 Chron. xxxiv. 32, 33.

gence: and when forced by their convictions to concede somewhat of their fancied rights, they will yield only as Pharaoh did, when necessitated by a sense of present judgments, and the fear of more. He at first would not suffer the Hebrews to sacrifice to their God at all: then he would permit it in the land of Egypt: then it might be in the borders of the wilderness: then the men might go, but they must leave their little ones as a pledge of their return: then the women and children might go, but not the cattle: at last he was glad to get rid of all[c]. Thus sinners will plead for this and that sin as long as they can entertain any hope of safety in the indulgence of it; but when they feel themselves utterly undone, they will cast out of the vessel the tackle and the wheat itself, rather than perish in the great abyss[d]. Yes, let them be really persuaded that the care of their souls is the one thing needful, and they will consent that God shall prescribe his own terms: they will say, with Saul, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do[e]?" The covenant which Josiah proposed was exceeding strict; they were to "keep God's commandments, and testimonies, and statutes, yea, to keep them with all their heart and with all their soul:" but they did not object to the terms; on the contrary, we are told "they stood to the covenant." Thus it will be with us also: the most self-denying commandment will not appear grievous[f], but "holy, and just, and good[g]:" and we shall cordially submit to it without any limitations or reserves.]

We shall not dismiss this subject without adding a word,

1. Of Reproof—

[How many instead of using all their influence for God, exert it in the service of the devil! We speak not merely of those who tempt others to drunkenness, lewdness, or any other gross iniquity; but of those who by their vain, worldly, or careless conduct lead others to think lightly of sin, and to live in a neglect of their souls. In this way every person, whatever be his station, exerts, however unintentionally, a very extensive influence, which by a different conduct might be turned to good account. Say not, like Cain, "Am I my brother's keeper?" for all of you are accountable to God for the use which you make of your influence; and you will receive from God, not only according to the good or evil which you have done yourselves, but according to that which you have occasioned in others.]

2. Of caution—

[We are ready in a time of sickness, and under convictions of

[c] Exod. viii. 25, 28. & x. 11, 24. & xii. 31—33.
[d] Acts xxvii. 38. [e] Acts ix. 6. [f] 1 John v. 3.
[g] Rom. vii. 12.

of sin, to make covenants with God; like the Israelites who said, "All that the Lord hath said, will we do, and be obedient[h]." But when we make them in our own strength, we shall violate them exactly as they did. Let not any then be hasty in making vows, or think that they can execute them by any power of their own. To give up ourselves to God is certainly right; but in order to do it effectually, we must be strong, not in ourselves, but "in the Lord, and in the power of his might[i]."]

3. Of consolation—

[If we were to be saved by our own faithfulness, who amongst us would be able to stand before God? Alas! "our own goodness has often been as the morning dew, and as the early cloud that passeth away." But, thanks be to God! there is a covenant made by our great Head and Surety[k]; a covenant in which we all are interested; "a covenant ordered in all things and sure[l]." Let this then be the real ground of our hope: let us lay hold on it, and cleave unto it. Let not, however, our affiance in this tempt us to violate our own engagements; for negligence in performing our vows to God will infallibly prove us to be strangers to the Gospel-covenant. Let us rather "give ourselves wholly to the Lord;" that while we trust in "the blood of the everlasting covenant," we may approve ourselves to him as "good and faithful servants."]

[h] Exod. xxiv. 7. [i] Eph. vi. 10. [k] Ps. lxxxix. 3, 28, 34, 35, 36.
[l] 2 Sam. xxiii. 5. with Jer. xxxi. 31—34. & xxxii. 38—41.

CCLXIII.

THE CHARACTER OF JOSIAH.

2 Kin. xxiii. 25. *And like unto him there was no king before him, that turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after him arose there any like him.*

THIS is the character given of king Josiah. A similar eulogium had been passed on his progenitor, Hezekiah; of whom it is said, "He trusted in the Lord God of Israel; so that after him was none like him of all the kings of Judah, nor any that were before him[a]." But there is nothing contrary in the two accounts: each of these persons had his peculiar excellencies, in which he surpassed all others: Hezekiah was distinguished (as the words cited intimate,)

[a] Ch. xviii. 5.

mate,) for his confidence in God; and Josiah, as our text informs us, for his zeal and piety. No person, merely human, was ever perfect, since the introduction of sin into the world. There have indeed been bright characters, who have reflected with great lustre and fidelity some rays of "the sun of righteousness;" but of Christ alone can it be said, that "He is light, and in him is no darkness at all."

The character here given of Josiah is as exalted as any that was ever ascribed to fallen man: and, for the purpose of illustrating it, we propose to mark some of the chief features of which it was composed.

I. He began to serve God at a very early period of life—

[At eight years old he began to reign: and no sooner did he arrive at years of discretion, than he began seriously and devoutly to serve the Lord[b]. At sixteen years of age, when it might have been expected that he should be studious only of pleasure, he turned from earthly vanities to seek his happiness in God: and at twenty years of age, when it is probable he began to exercise without controul his regal office, he set himself to reform the whole nation. Not fearing the face of man, he stemmed the torrent of iniquity which had overwhelmed the land; and devoted to the service of his God all the powers with which he was invested.

This was doubtless most pleasing to God, who required by the law that the first-fruits of man and beast should be his, and who has given a peculiar promise to those who seek him in early life; "They that seek me early shall find me." Happy would it be if all of us began at the early age of sixteen to serve the Lord; and if from that period every talent committed to our care were improved for God! How much better this, than to be wasting our youthful days in sin and vanity! True, we have not all the same authority as he; but all in our respective spheres should exert ourselves to the utmost of our ability; remembering, that if youth labours under some disadvantages in point of influence, it has a tendency to put to shame the indolence of more advanced years, and to impress more forcibly the minds of those who are yet young and tender. Whilst then we say to all, "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth," we would exhort all, from the first moment that they feel the value of their own souls, to

[b] 2 Chron. xxxiv. 3.

to exert themselves with all diligence to benefit the souls of others———]

II. He proceeded in his career with extraordinary zeal and diligence—

[It seems almost incredible that this young monarch should effect so much as he did in so short a time. He first began to root out idolatry from those tribes which were under his own dominion; and then set himself (by the connivance or permission of the Assyrian monarch) to effect the same changes among the remnant of the ten tribes. Not choosing to devolve these labours on others, he proceeded himself "throughout all the land of Israel," that he might see his orders carried into execution. The means he used to produce a reformation were of the most extraordinary kind; breaking in pieces all the images that he could find, strewing the dust of them on the graves of those who had sacrificed unto them; and burning on the altars the bones of the priests who had placed their offerings upon them[c].

Here we see how justly he deserved the character given him in our text: he entered into his work "with all his heart, and all his soul, and all his might." And this is the spirit which we also should manifest in all our services for God. We should not indulge a lukewarm spirit, but "be zealously affected always in a good cause." "Whatever our hand findeth to do, we should do with all our might"———]

III. He was as zealous in promoting piety as in suppressing vice—

[When he had put down the reigning abominations, he endeavoured to establish the worship of the true God: he repaired the temple, which had fallen into decay; he convened all his subjects, "the Priests and Levites, and all the people both small and great," and himself read to them the word of God, and made a covenant with the Lord both for himself and them to serve the Lord God with their whole hearts, and "he caused all the people to stand to the covenant." After this he kept a passover, such as had not been kept even from the time of Samuel to that hour: and toward the expenses of it he himself very largely contributed.

Now here was real piety: here was a manifest regard for the honour of God and the good of men. This it is that most exalts a character. Many there are who will be extremely zealous against open profaneness, who yet have no real concern for God's honour and glory. But we must combine "godliness with honesty." We must labour, each in his sphere, to promote the knowledge and the worship of God: and having given up ourselves to him in a perpetual covenant, we must endeavour to engage others also to a like surrender of themselves to him. In a peculiar

[c] See 2 Chron. xxxiv. 3—7.

liar manner we should ourselves respect, and to the utmost of our power cause others also to regard, the wonders of redeeming love. Since "Christ our passover is sacrificed for us, we should keep the feast"— — — Here is scope for the best energies of our souls. In reference to these things it is not possible to be too earnest, provided we are alike attentive to every duty, and careful "that God in all things may be glorified through Christ Jesus"———]

IV. In all he did he adhered strictly to the word of God—

[From the first moment that the Scriptures were found and read to him, he determined to make them the one rule of his conduct. He "humbled himself deeply before God" for the utter disregard of them which had obtained throughout the whole kingdom: and he himself read them in the ears of his people, and required a conformity to them in every particular. In celebrating the passover, he was especially mindful of every direction given by Moses relative to that divine ordinance; and indeed in the whole of his conduct he laboured to secure a perfect compliance with God's revealed will. This is the thing noticed, both in the text, and in many other places; and it forms a very essential part of that goodness, for which he is applauded in the sacred records[d].

It often happens, that men are zealous for their own party and their own opinions; and men in such a state will sometimes "compass sea and land to make one proselyte:" but unless we build according to "the model given us in the mount," we lose all our labour. To please our God, we must have a strict regard to his revealed will: and for this end we must study the holy Scriptures, and "turn from them neither to the right hand nor the left."]

ADDRESS—

[Here we may rejoice, that we all have the Scriptures in our hands. They are not hid, as in the days of Josiah; but are so freely and universally dispersed, that every man in the kingdom who desires to study them, may obtain them. How signally blessed are we in this respect! Nay, we not only have access to the Scriptures, but have them read and expounded to us from Sabbath to Sabbath. Let us then learn to tremble at the word. Let us remember that every jot and tittle of it will be fulfilled in its season. Let us bear in mind, that our wilful deviations from it will be visited with the divine displeasure: and that, if we study to fulfil it "with all our heart, and soul, and might," God, who knoweth our hearts, will bear testimony to us in the day of judgment, as here he has done to king Josiah; and will say to us before the assembled universe, "Well done, good and faithful servants, enter ye into the joy of your Lord."]

[d] 2 Chron. xxxv. 26.

CCLXIV.

THE PROPRIETY OF CONSIDERING TIMES AND CIRCUMSTANCES.

1 Chron. xii. 32. *The children of Issachar were men that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do.*

THE doctrine of expediency is of difficult investigation: but it is highly deserving of our attention; because the greater part of our conduct in every situation of life depends upon it: and it is no small honour to the tribe of Issachar, that they were distinguished above all the other tribes of Israel in practical acquaintance with this important branch of human knowledge. In the account given of the other tribes who came to David to Hebron, we are merely told, how many they brought with them to place David on the throne of Israel: but in relation to the tribe of Issachar we are informed, that they acted from a dispassionate consideration of David's claims, as compared with those of the house of Saul, and from a full conviction, that, in supporting David, they performed an acceptable service to God himself.

From the character here given of them we shall take occasion to shew,

I. That our conduct must often be affected by times and circumstances—

We are in the midst of a world changing every moment, ourselves also changing with the things around us. Hence arises a necessity of attending to times and circumstances in our concerns, of whatever nature they be;—

1. Civil—

[It is the knowing how to judge of the various occurrences that arise, and how to improve them to the good of the State, that constitutes the great science of politics: and it is to this knowledge, that the expression of "understanding the times" primarily refers[a]. A statesman cannot determine what will be fit to be done a year hence, because circumstances may arise which would render all his plans abortive. He may indeed display

[a] See Esth. i. 13.

display much wisdom in the exercise of foresight, and in providing for contingencies; but still he must of necessity follow events which he cannot controul, and be himself controlled by existing circumstances: and he is the greatest benefactor to the State, who is enabled to judge of them most correctly, and to adapt his measures to them most wisely.]

2. Social—

[All of us have, as it were, a little world around us, wherein we move; and all experience the same vicissitudes as are found in larger communities. In our families, innumerable things arise from day to day, which require us to vary our line of conduct. Sometimes ease and gaiety may become us, and at other times seriousness and reserve: sometimes a yielding spirit will be proper, and sometimes it will be necessary to be firm. It is no little wisdom to know how to conduct ourselves towards persons of different dispositions and of different habits: but we should labour diligently for the attainment of this wisdom, because the happiness both of ourselves and others most essentially depends upon it.]

3. Personal—

[It is obvious, that a very different deportment becomes us in youth and in age, in prosperity and adversity. Solomon tells us, that "there is to every thing a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven[b]"——— To discern all these occasions, and to improve them aright, is the grand line of distinction between the thoughtless and considerate, the fool and the wise[c].]

But if our conduct must be influenced by them in temporal matters, there is still reason to inquire,

II. How far it may properly be affected by them in the concerns of religion—

That we may attend to times and circumstances, is certain—

[This appears both from the example of Christ and his Apostles, and from many plain directions given us in the Scripture. Our blessed Lord at one time was silent before his accusers, ("insomuch that the Governor marvelled greatly,") and at another time "witnessed a good confession before many witnesses:" at one time he hid himself from his enemies, and at another delivered himself into their hands: at one time delivered his instructions darkly in parables, and at another spoke "plainly and without a parable." In like manner St. Paul did not deem "all things expedient that were lawful[cc];" but would sometimes

[b] See Eccl. iii. 1—8. [c] Eccl. ii. 14. Prov. xxii. 3.
[cc] 1 Cor. vi. 12. & x. 23.

sometimes conform to the ceremonial law, and at other times neglect and even oppose it; at one time sanctioning circumcision, and at another withstanding it with all his might: and in his ministry he would set before his audience milk or strong meat, according as he saw occasion. So all the Apostles were to fast indeed, but not whilst the Bridegroom was with them.

Such conduct is also prescribed to *us*. We are to recommend religion to the uttermost; but "not to set our pearls before swine:" we are to enforce the practice of it in its utmost extent; but not to put new wine into old bottles: we are to "answer a fool at one time according to his folly;" and, at another, "not according to his folly."]

But how far we may attend to them, is not easy to determine—

[Every distinct case must be determined by the peculiar circumstances that attend it: it will be in vain therefore to descend to particulars. We may however lay down one general rule, which will be of service in determining most of the cases that can occur. *The consideration of times and circumstances is never to affect our principles, but only the application of them.*

Our principles must be fixed by the unerring standard of God's word. The love of God, and the love of our fellow-creatures, a regard for truth, and honour, and integrity, with all other Christian graces, must be as fixed principles in our minds, from which we are never to swerve on any account. We must not regard life itself in comparison of these. But then the peculiar mode in which these principles are to operate, must be a matter of discretion, arising from the circumstances of the case. And herein is the difference between a novice in religion, and one who has been long walking in the ways of God: the love of the more advanced Christian has "grown in knowledge and in all judgment;" "he discerns" more clearly than others "the things that differ;" and is enabled to combine, what we should always study to unite, "the wisdom of the serpent with the harmlessness of the dove."]

It being clear then that our conduct may be affected by them, we proceed to shew,

III. What there is in the times and circumstances of the present day to affect it—

There is no little resemblance between the times of which our text speaks, and of the times wherein we live [d].

The

[d] Any circumstances that may have occurred, as sudden deaths &c. &c. might here be brought forward, as motives to exalt Jesus to the throne of Israel.

The elevation to the throne of Israel was typical of the elevation of Christ to an empire over the souls of men—

[Christ is the true David, to whom all the tribes of Israel must bow[e]. A long series of prophecies have foretold his reign; and have given us reason to expect that that reign shall be universal — — —]

And the circumstances of the present day loudly call upon us to install Jesus in our hearts—

[Never since the Apostolic age was there such a zeal for the Bible as at the present day. Princes and Nobles, no less than the Ministers of Religion themselves, are expatiating on its value, and commending to us the Saviour, as therein revealed. When all the tribes then are uniting in this blessed object, shall not we concur to the utmost of our power? True indeed the numbers belonging to Issachar bare no proportion to those of other tribes: they were only 200, when the others were 30, 40, and even 100,000 men. But we must observe, that these 200 were the heads and governors of that tribe; and "all the rest were at their command." So let it be amongst us: let those who are foremost in rank, in learning, in wealth, lead the way, saying, "Come let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant that shall not be forgotten:" and let all others unite with heart and hand, to seat Jesus on the throne of our hearts, and to glorify him as our Lord and our God.]

In applying to yourselves this subject, we would suggest a CAUTION or two;—

1. Guard against yielding to any corrupt bias—

[In consulting times and circumstances, you will be in danger of being warped by your interests or passions. But you must watch and pray against them, and beg help from God that you may not be drawn aside by them.]

2. Bear in mind that God will judge you in the last day according to what he knows to have been our true motives—

[We cannot deceive him — — — and should be careful not to deceive ourselves.]

3. Beg of God to give you the "wisdom that is profitable to direct"—

[God has promised to give wisdom, even "sound wisdom and discretion," to all who ask it of him[f]. And let none be discouraged, as though a want of education or abilities incapacitated them

[e] Hos. iii. 5. Isai. xlv. 23—25. [f] Jam. i. 5.

them for the due discharge of their duty; for the *heart*, and not the *head*, is the seat of *this* wisdom; and God has promised, that "the meek he will guide in judgment, the meek he will teach his way."]

CCLXV.

DAVID'S THANKSGIVING AT THE CARRYING UP OF THE ARK.

1 Chron. xvi. 7—15. *Then on that day David delivered first this psalm, to thank the Lord, into the hand of Asaph and his brethren. Give thanks unto the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the people. Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him, talk ye of all his wondrous works. Glory ye in his holy name: let the heart of them rejoice that seek the Lord. Seek the Lord, and his strength; seek his face continually. Remember his marvellous works that he hath done, his wonders, and the judgments of his mouth; O ye seed of Israel his servant, ye children of Jacob his chosen ones. He is the Lord our God; his judgments are in all the earth. Be ye mindful always of his covenant.*

IF any one entertain a doubt whether "the ways of religion be ways of pleasantness and peace," he needs only look to the history before us, and his doubts will vanish in an instant. It may be thought indeed, that, because the former attempt of David to carry up the ark was attended with sorrow, the general effect of God's service is not such as has been represented: but it must be remembered, that, on that occasion, though David meant well, he was criminally negligent respecting the mode of carrying his purposes into effect; and that God *on that account* had frowned upon him[a]. But when he was duly observant of God's commands respecting the ark, his soul was filled with unutterable joy, to which he gave vent in the Psalm before us.

This Psalm is taken out of several others. As far as the 21st verse, it occurs in the 105th Psalm: the greater part of the remainder is found in the 96th. It was given by David for the use of the Church, on occasion of carrying up the ark to Jerusa-

[a] Ch. xiv. 10, 11. with xv. 13.

Jerusalem. In the part which we have just read, we behold religion in its full exercise: we see exhibited in the brightest colours,

I. The general frame of mind that it requires—

We have not now to speak of moral actions, but rather of spiritual affections. We are to contemplate the Christian now in the dispositions of his mind and the exercises of his soul towards God. And here we observe,

1. That God should be the supreme object of his regard—

[The worldly man rises no higher than the world: "he minds" and savours nothing but what is earthly and carnal[b]. But the spiritual man "minds the things of the Spirit," and endeavours to set God, as it were, always before him. In the Psalm before us, there was evidently but one object in David's mind. The world, and all that is in it, was forgotten; and God was "all in all." Mark every sentence, or member of a sentence; and this will instantly appear. And should not this be the general frame and habit of *our* minds? Undoubtedly it should. We need not indeed be always occupied in religious exercises; for there are many other duties to be performed: but we should never for a moment lose the habit of holy and heavenly affections: a sense of God's unbounded love and mercy should be wrought, as it were, into the very constitution and frame of our minds, so that we should no more cease to feel a supreme regard for him, than a worldly man does for the things of this world. In a word, his perfections, his word, and his works, should be ever so present to our mind, as it was to David on this occasion, or to Adam in paradise — — —]

This, whatever it may be called by ungodly men, is truly *rational* religion—

[A supreme delight in God is by many deemed enthusiasm: and the religion that consists in speculation, and theory, and form, is supposed to be exclusively entitled to the appellation of *rational*. But, if God be so infinitely glorious, that even angels themselves are in comparison of him no more than a glowworm to the sun, he ought to be proportionably elevated in our hearts: and if the wonders he has wrought for us are beyond the powers of language to express, or of imagination to conceive, we should shew our sense of them by thinking of them, and speaking of them, and living continually under a sense of our obligations to him on account of them. Were the Jews required to testify their gratitude

[b] Rom. viii. 5. Phil. iii. 18, 19.

tude in this manner for the mercies vouchsafed to *them*? How much more should *we* labour to express our gratitude for that infinitely greater work of redemption which he has wrought out for us by the blood of his only dear Son!

Again; if Christ our Saviour be now in heaven, should not our affections be there[c]; and "our conversation be there" also[d]? I say, that, provided we be not led to neglect our worldly duties, (which are in no respect incompatible with heavenly affections,) it is not possible to have our minds too much filled with love to God: on the contrary, the total surrender of all our faculties and powers to him is "a reasonable service[e]."]

But we shall see yet more clearly the excellency of Religion, if we consider,

II. The particular duties it enjoins—

St. Paul gives us a short summary of duties, very similar to those that are enjoined in the text: "Rejoice evermore; pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you[f]." Thus David exhorts us,

1. To thank the Lord for all his past mercies—

[Were this exhortation addressed to the most miserable and the most abandoned of the human race, it would be highly reasonable, since the long-suffering which God has exercised towards him is itself a great salvation[g]. But it is addressed to "the children of Israel," even "the chosen ones" of the Lord: and who can ever find cause for praise, if they do not? If they fill not the air with their hosannahs, the very "stones will cry out against them." Do but reflect on your unnumbered mercies, especially the gift of God's only dear Son *for* you, and the gift of Salvation by him *to* you. Surely you should sing to him, yea, be singing his praises from day to day: you should be already anticipating the employment of heaven, and be singing day and night, "Salvation to God and to the Lamb for ever and ever."]

2. To pray to him for future blessings—

[The ark, as being the symbol of the Deity, was that before which the prayers of the high priest were to be made, and from whence Jehovah was pleased to communicate his answers. Hence, in our text it is called "his strength." This ark was a type of Christ, "in whom dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily," and who is the fountain from whence all spiritual blessings must flow[h]. To HIM therefore the Psalmist points,

[c] Col. iii. 1—4. [d] Phil. iii. 20. [e] Rom. xii. 1.
[f] 1 Thess. v. 16—18. [g] 2 Pet. iii. 15.
[h] John i. 16. & xiv. 13, 14. with Eph. i. 22, 23.

points, when he says, "Seek the Lord and *his strength*, seek his face continually." There is not any occasion whereon it is not our duty and our privilege to seek him. Nothing should be regarded as too small, nothing too great, to ask at his hands. The command is, "In *every* thing, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God." And the promise for our encouragement is, "Ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you." O that we could go thus to God "continually," as children to their parent! Surely, however "wide we opened our mouths, he would fill them."]

3. To glory in him as our God and portion—

[In our text, David observes, "He is the Lord our God:" and elsewhere he says, "O Lord, thou art *my* God." This it is which elevates the soul to the highest state of bliss that it can enjoy on earth. The man of this world glories not in wealth, or honour, unless he can call them *his*. It is the property which we have in them that produces the feelings of joyous exultation. We should therefore strive to the uttermost to ascertain this point, that we are interested in the Saviour, and are authorized on good grounds to say, "My Beloved is mine, and I am his." As for all other objects of glorying, we should renounce them all, as incompatible with the Saviour's honour; and should determinately say with the Apostle, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."]

4. To be always mindful of his covenant—

[The covenant here spoken of, is the covenant made with Abraham, and confirmed with an oath unto Isaac[i]. In its literal sense it refers to the land of Canaan as the inheritance of Abraham's descendants: but in its mystical import it refers to all the spiritual seed of Abraham, who are made partakers of an infinitely nobler inheritance in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed the other was a mere shadow: and this is the substance. This was the covenant made with Christ before the foundation of the world[k]; "a covenant ordered in all things and sure," an everlasting covenant that shall never be annulled. This covenant should be for ever in our minds: we should regard it as the one source of all the blessings we enjoy, and our great security for the continuance of them. This it is that will keep the mind firm and stable amidst all the difficulties and temptations that we have to encounter; since the execution and fulfilment of all its provisions depends on the faithfulness of an unchanging God[l]. We should therefore contemplate this covenant, and trust in it, and plead it before God, and rejoice in an assured hope, that we

[i] ver. 16—18.
[k] Gal. iii. 17. & Heb. vi. 13, 14, 17, 18. 2 Tim. i. 2.
[l] Jer. xxxii. 40. Mal. iii. 6.

we shall in due time inherit the kingdom provided for us before the foundation of the world."] ***

To IMPROVE this subject, we will add a few words,

1. Of reproof—

[How little is there of such religion as this in the midst of us! The generality know nothing of it by actual experience ——— and many, of whom we may hope that they are "God's chosen ones," scarcely ever rise higher than to a state of mourning for their sins, and of trust in God for his mercy. They are occupied so much about *themselves*, as almost to forget *their God:* that is, they do not contemplate as they ought, his unbounded excellencies, or delight themselves in him as their God and portion. O let not any of you rest in a state so unprofitable, and destitute of comfort as this! but seek to attain the full enjoyment of God in this world, as the best preparation for enjoying him in the world to come.]

2. Of encouragement—

[That which in our text is an exhortation, "Be mindful always of his covenant," is, in the Psalm from whence it is taken, a declaration respecting God, that "He hath remembered his covenant for ever[m]." Yes; he has remembered it, and ever will remember it; nor will he ever suffer one jot or tittle of it to fail. In that covenant he has made ample provision for all our necessities: so that, if we are ready to despond, as if this elevated state of mind could never be attained, nor these duties ever be performed, we need only look to that covenant, and all our fears will be dispelled. It is, as has been before observed, "ordered in all things, and sure;" and therefore the weakest shall have grace sufficient for him, and the most timid find security in the arms of an unchanging God.]

[m] Ps. cv. viii.

*** In treating this subject, care should be taken, as much as possible, to preserve the life and spirit of the text.

CCLXVI.

DAVID'S ATTENTION TO HIS HOUSEHOLD.

1 Chron. xvi. 43. *And David returned to bless his house.*

IT is truly delightful to see the operation of religion on the soul of man; how it transforms him from a carnal and selfish creature, into a spiritual and

and heavenly Being, who, like the sun in the firmament, steadily pursues his course, and shines brighter and brighter unto the perfect day. Beautifully was it exemplified by David in the history before us; in illustration of which we shall notice,

1. The work in which he had been engaged—

This was, the bringing up of the ark from the house of Obed-edom to Jerusalem: and,

A glorious work it was—

[*In itself*, it was a work of vast importance. For many years had the ark lien in obscurity at Kirjath-jearim, without any application being made to it for instruction from God. But, when brought up to Jerusalem, it would be accessible at all times; and, in all difficult emergencies, the will of Jehovah might be learned from it. Indeed, the whole account respecting it shews us clearly, in what light it was viewed by the nation at large———

As a typical act, its importance rises still higher in our estimation. It was undoubtedly typical of Christ's ascension into heaven; for in that view it is spoken of in a great variety of Psalms[a], and in that view the Psalms relating to it are quoted in the New Testament[b]. Let other Psalms, from the 96th to 99th, be read as referring to both these events, and they will fully illustrate the importance of the work which David had just completed———]

And it had been performed in a manner most acceptable unto God—

[In its commencement, it was begun by consulting all the great men in the nation, who were stirred up to concur in it[c]——— In its progress, nothing was left to human invention, as before; but all was conducted with the strickest attention to God's revealed will. Nor did David commit the service altogether to others: no; he himself attended the procession, and played and sang with all his might; yea, and danced also before the ark with such holy ecstasies, as to subject himself to the scorn and censure of his own wife; who being a stranger to those divine raptures, imputed them, not to pious fervour, but to indecent wantonness. But his joyous exultation was such as the occasion required, and such as, though condemned by Michal, was most pleasing unto God.]

Having

[a] Ps. xxiv. xlvii. lxviii. cxxxii.
[b] Compare Ps. lxviii. 18. with Eph. iv. 8. [c] Ch. xiii. 1—3.

Having seen the service to which he had gone forth, we proceed to notice,

II. The work to which he returned—

Though he might be well supposed at the conclusion of his service to need repose, yet he went home only to protract his labours in another way. He returned to bless his house; that is,

1. To obtain blessings for them by his prayers—

[He would not confine his religious exercises to public occasions, but went home to stir up in his family those blessed emotions with which his own soul was filled. He was anxious that all his wives, his children, and his servants should be partakers of his joy: and therefore he would unite with them in fervent supplication to the God of all grace, that they might themselves "know the Lord from the least even to the greatest of them," and all experience the blessedness of his salvation.

Here we behold a bright example, which it behoves us all to follow. Family prayer is, alas! too often neglected, or at best but coldly performed, by many, who profess a high regard for public ordinances: but the true child of Abraham will "command his house and children after him to fear the Lord[d]," and will say with Joshua, "Whatsoever others may do, I and my house will serve the Lord[e]." If we have family wants, and family mercies, we should unite our prayers and our praises with our families, that God may be acknowledged as the one source from whence all good either has issued, or can be hoped for: and though we can easily imagine circumstances wherein such domestic services are impracticable, yet we cannot imagine any real piety to exist where such duties are wilfully neglected.]

2. To render himself a blessing to them by his conduct—

[It was promised to Abraham that he should not only be blessed himself, but be a blessing also to others: and this promise is in fact made to all the believing seed of Abraham. To make others happy was no small part of David's ambition. Hence he went to his house determining to contribute as far as possible to the edification and comfort of all connected with him. He would instruct the ignorant; and teach, not by precept only, but by example also. His determination was to "walk before his house in a perfect way[f]" — — — He would not be proud, or imperious, or passionate, or fretful; but would regulate all his tempers and dispositions by the golden rule, of doing as he would

[d] Gen. xviii. 19. [e] Josh. xxiv. 15. [f] Ps. ci. 2.

would be done unto: and "the law of kindness would be ever in his lips."

How different is this from the conduct of many, who from the public ordinances, in which they profess to take delight, go down to their houses to make them wretched and miserable, rather than to bless them! O let the professors of religion look well to this; for, as a consistent Christian is a blessing wherever he goes, so an inconsistent Christian is a curse, and a stumbling-block to all around him.]

LEARN then from hence,

1. How highly we are privileged—

[The ark, even the Lord Jesus Christ himself, is present in the midst of us. To him we may have access; and of him we may inquire continually: and every blessing which was typically derived from the symbol of his presence, shall be really and spiritually obtained by all who seek him. If then David and the whole kingdom of Israel felt such exalted joy in the possession of that which was a mere shadow, let us not be unmindful of our privilege in possessing the substance.]

2. In what way we should improve our privileges—

[Let us not only rejoice in them ourselves, but endeavour to communicate the benefit of them to others. Let all who see us be the better for us; and all who stand in any relation to us be constrained to say, that "God is with us of a truth."]

CCLXVII.

DAVID'S ADVICE TO SOLOMON.

1 Chron. xxviii. 9. *And thou, Solomon my son, know thou the God of thy father, and serve him with a perfect heart, and with a willing mind: for the Lord searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts: if thou seek him, he will be found of thee; but if thou forsake him he will cast thee off for ever.*

WHATEVER may have been their own conduct through life, it is the wish of most men in a dying hour, that their children should walk in the ways of probity and honour. But men of piety have higher views: they wish their children not merely to pass through this world with credit, but to obtain happiness beyond the grave. The advice of David to the

the words before us, is precisely such as every religious parent would wish to give to his surviving family. Let us observe,

I. The advice here given—

The occasion was most solemn. David had desired to build a temple for the Lord, but was forbidden; and was directed to devolve that office on his son Solomon. All the princes and great men of the nation were convened to assist at the solemnity: and in the presence of them all did David direct his son,

1. Whom to seek—

[The terms here used have doubtless a peculiar force. David does not say to his son, "Know thou the God *of Israel*;" but "Know thou the God of *thy father*;" by which expression he evidently called the attention of Solomon to the character of Jehovah as exemplified in all his dealings towards *him*: it is as though he had said, "Know thou that *sovereign* God, who chose me above all to rule his people Israel ——— Know that *almighty* God who, in all my dangers from Saul or other enemies, has preserved me to the present hour ——— Know that *merciful* God who forgave me all my great transgressions in the matter of Uriah ——— and that *faithful* God who has fulfilled to me all his great and precious promises, in raising up thee to sit on my throne, and to build a temple to the Lord" ———

"*Know*" this God: study his character as displayed in all his conduct towards me: acquaint thyself with him in the most intimate and endearing manner: and seek him as thy friend, thy portion, thine eternal great reward! But remember that it is in Christ only that this character of God can be fully seen ——— Seek then to know God as reconciled to you in the Son of his love; and let "this God be your God for ever and ever."]

2. How to serve him—

[Integrity of heart is indispensable in all who would serve their God aright. *Absolute* perfection is not to be expected by fallen man: but that measure of perfection which consists in a total freedom from all guile, not only may, but must, be attained. To be "Israelites indeed," we must be "without guile." There must be no lust, which we desire to retain; no duty, from which we draw back; no sacrifice which we are averse to make: the will of God, even his whole will, without any limitation or exception, must be that to which we aim to be conformed ——— And in our labours to fulfil our duty, we must not be constrained by slavish fear, but by filial love. We must feel the

service of our God to be perfect freedom; and find all our delight in it, like the angels, who "do his will, hearkening to the voice of his word" ——— As we are to love our God, so also are we to serve him, "with all our heart, and mind, and soul, and strength."]

The importance of this charge is strongly marked in,

II. The considerations with which it is enforced—

Two arguments are here used to impress the more deeply on Solomon's mind the foregoing exhortation. They are briefly these;

1. That God is privy to our inmost thoughts—

[If God could judge only by the outward appearance, we might with less danger be inattentive to our hearts: but the heart of man is as visible to him as the sacrifices when flayed and divided asunder were to the priests of old[a]. Not the thoughts only, but "the imaginations of the thoughts," the very first risings of them before they are formed into a distinct apprehension of the mind, are all seen and marked by him, so as to ascertain with precision their nature and quality; and to make them infallible grounds of condemnation or acquittal in the day of judgment. Not actions only, but "the spirits of men are weighed by him," so as to discern how much there is of good or evil in every inclination, affection, appetite, and motion of the soul.

What a reason is this for attending to the frame of our minds in the service of our God! That, and that only which is according to his word, will be accepted by him: whatever there is of formality, or hypocrisy, or of any evil principle, will all be separated as chaff from the wheat, to be consumed in the fire, when the wheat is treasured up in his garner. Alas! how little that is truly good, will be found even in the best of men! Consider this, all ye who would find acceptance with God; and endeavour to approve yourselves to Him, "who searcheth the heart, and trieth the reins."]

2. That he will deal with us according as we conduct ourselves towards him—

[It is grievous that men should explain away the plainest declarations of God, in order to accommodate them to human systems. There is nothing clearer in all the inspired volume, than that "God will be found of them that seek him, and cast off those who forsake him." We appeal to the experience of all who are in the slightest degree acquainted with vital godliness. "Did God ever say to any man, Seek my face in vain?" ——— On the other

[a] Heb. iv. 13. τετραχηλισμένα.

other hand, Who ever turned back from him, without suffering loss in his soul? Who has not found that the Spirit of God may be grieved and provoked to withdraw his gracious communications? Most assuredly he will not always strive with man, but will give us up to our hearts' lusts, if we wilfully harbour those dispositions or affections which are hateful in his sight. Moreover, in the eternal world, he will recompense every man exactly according to his works; adjudging to his diligent servants a reward proportioned to their diligence in improving their talents, and to the disobedient servants a punishment proportioned to their guilt.

Who can reflect on this, and not feel the force of the advice given in our text? Our happiness both in time and in eternity depends on our present diligence and fidelity. Let us therefore implore help from God, that we may so devote ourselves to him now, as to be approved by him in the day of judgment.]

ADDRESS—

1. To parents—

[You see in David, what should be your chief desire in behalf of your children. We say not that you should be indifferent about their worldly advancement; for that also is important in its place: but your great concern should be to have them truly pious and devoted to God. Labour then, by every possible means, to attain this point. Call them to you, and address them each by name with all tenderness and fidelity; remembering that you yourselves must answer unto God for the influence with which he has invested you for their good; and that, if they perish through your neglect, their blood will be required at your hands.]

2. To those who are coming forth into life—

[Such advice as that which is given in our text, you are ready to judge premature, or at least to think you have good reason for delaying your attention to it. But are you young, and moving in an elevated sphere, and engaging in concerns of vast importance? So was Solomon: yet were these no reasons for David to withhold the advice, or with Solomon to reject it. Remember, it is for eternity, and not for time only, that you should live; and, if you disregard the admonitions of your parents, they who now so long for your welfare, will be swift witnesses against you at the day of judgment.]

3. To all who are here present—

[It is not unbecoming a Minister of Christ to regard his flock with parental solicitude, or to address them in the language of our text. Let me then address each of you, as it were, in the presence of the whole collective body, and urge you to seek after God with your whole hearts. Rest not in a formal

a formal routine of duties, or in a partial conformity to his revealed will: but see that your "hearts are right with him;" and never rest till you have "the witness of his Spirit," and "the testimony of your own conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity you have your conversation in the world." Such a state of mind is most desirable for every one of us; and it is the best preparative, no less for the duties of this life, than for the enjoyments of the life to come.]

CCLXVIII.

MISSIONARY SERVICES CONSECRATED TO GOD.*

1 Chron. xxix. 5. *Who then is willing to consecrate his service this day unto the Lord?*

THAT the God of heaven and earth possesses a claim to the service of his creatures, is a truth which reason itself inculcates. The acknowledgment of this claim is even enforced upon us by the brute creation! "The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib:" much more then should we consider our obligations to Him who hath nourished *us*, "in whom we live, and move, and have our being." But how are all the Divine claims strengthened when we reflect on the inestimable blessings conveyed to us in the work of redemption! "What shall we render unto the Lord for all his benefits?" Is it not our "reasonable service" that we should "present our bodies and souls a living and holy sacrifice" unto Him, who hath bought us with his blood? Such indeed is the blindness and obduracy of the heart, that even the wonders of redemption prove, too often, ineffectual to excite in us a spirit of love and gratitude towards the Redeemer. Yet certainly, the anxious inquiry of the true Christian is this, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" and under a lively impression of the unmerited goodness of God,

* This was a *Missionary Sermon*, written by my ever-honoured friend and brother, the Rev. Thomas Thomason, formerly for many years my co-adjutor in my Church, and now for the last eleven years the Hon. East-India Company's Chaplain at Calcutta: and I insert it here as a valuable present to the Church, and as a memorial of that unfeigned respect and love with which I have for many years unceasingly regarded him.

God, he considers himself not as his own, but the Lord's, and glorifies God with his body and spirit, which are God's. If the current of our affections do not move in this direction, if the habit of our lives be not governed by this principle, our real character is at variance with our name and profession; we "have not the Spirit of Christ, and are none of his."

But, in addressing the present congregation, we may reasonably entertain a hope that these fundamental truths are generally understood and felt. When I reflect on the great object for which we are met together, and looking round this numerous assembly, observe the solemn attention and deep seriousness which pervades the house, I cannot but hope that, respecting the general principle on which the address of my text is founded, we are, for the most part, agreed. Omitting therefore the consideration of that service which, in the most extensive application of the text, is due to the blessed God, we proceed at once to the particular business of the day, and shall enter upon it by adverting to the portion of sacred history from whence our text is taken.

It had long been a favourite object with David, to build a temple to the Lord. In an early period of his reign, he communicated his wishes to Nathan: but it pleased God to deny him the request of his heart: "Go, and tell David my servant, Thus saith the Lord, Thou shalt not build me an house to dwell in.—It shall come to pass, when thy days be expired that thou must go to thy fathers, that I will raise up thy seed after thee, which shall be of thy sons; and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build me an house, and I will establish his throne for ever[s]." So great however was David's zeal for the honour of God, that though he was not himself permitted to build the house, he was resolved to promote the good work to the utmost of his power. With great industry he collected the necessary materials: the riches of conquered kings, and the spoils of plundered nations, were consecrated to the service;

[s] 1 Chron. xvii. 4, 11.

service; and to the vast treasures which he had amassed during a series of successful wars were added those which he had reserved out of his own private property. Thus he nobly devoted to the purposes of religion that wealth which others consume in ostentatious pageantry and expensive pleasures. Being at length furnished with immense supplies of the various requisites for the work, he, towards the close of his life, formed the necessary arrangements both for the erection of the temple and the regulation of its services. The pattern of the sanctuary, of the porch, and of the courts of the house of the Lord, with all the regulations for the priests in their courses, were delivered to him by the Lord. Anxious therefore that all things should be clearly understood, and that before his decease the work might be so fixed as to proceed afterwards without interruption, he summoned the chief men of the nation to Jerusalem, in order that he might, in the most solemn and public manner, deliver to them all the instructions he had received. The transactions of that great assembly merit our attention. He assembled, we are informed, "all the princes of Israel, the princes of the tribes, and the captains of the companies that ministered to the king by course, and the captains over the thousands, and captains over the hundreds, and the stewards over all the substance and possession of the king, and of his sons, with the officers, and with the mighty men, and with all the valiant men, unto Jerusalem[b]." What an interesting occasion was this! The aged monarch, cheered with the sight of this illustrious assembly, and animated with the hope that God was about to fulfil his gracious promises, stood upon his feet, and opened the occasion of their meeting with the utmost tenderness:—"Hear me, my brethren, my people." Then, having briefly stated the purpose for which he had convened them, he turned to his son Solomon, and, in an appropriate and pathetic address, exhorted him to know and serve the God of his father. He particularly

[b] 1 Chron. xxviii. 1.

cularly urged him to prosecute with diligence the building of the temple; distinctly stated the authority by which all his arrangements had been formed; and earnestly exhorted him to be of good courage, and to engage heartily in the work of the Lord. Afterwards, addressing the assembly, he tells them what preparations he had made for the house; "I have prepared with all my might for the house of my God, the gold for things to be made of gold, silver, brass, iron, precious stones, and marble in great abundance. Moreover, because I have set my affection to the house of my God, I have of mine own proper good, of gold and silver, which I have given to the house of my God, over and above all that I have prepared for the holy house, even three thousand talents of gold, and seven thousand talents of refined silver[c]:" (about eighteen millions sterling.) Then, in the words of the text, he asks them, "Who then is willing to consecrate his service to the Lord?" It need not surprise us that an address of this nature, enforced by such unexampled liberality, was attended with the happiest effects. A liberal contribution was immediately formed, amounting to above thirty millions.

The application of this history to our present purpose is evident. The object of the Society, whose labours we are assembled to promote, is to erect a temple to the Lord; not indeed a *material* temple, like David's, but a *spiritual* temple. Its object is to enlarge and extend the Church of Christ, by sending the Gospel into those dark corners of the earth, which have for ages been immersed in ignorance and sin. We would visit the waste places of the earth, and plant in the wilderness the "root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people[d]." Thither we would repair where the "tabernacle of David is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof[e]." We would be the instruments, if it might please God to bless our labours, of "building[f] again the

[c] 1 Chron. xxix. 2, 5. [d] Isai. xi. 10. [e] Amos ix. 12.
[f] Acts xv. 16, 17.

the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; of building again the ruins thereof, and of setting it up; that the residue of men may seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles upon whom the name of God is called." Encouraged by the gracious promise of our God, we pray that he would "arise, and have mercy upon Zion[g]." We have a good hope that "the time to favour her, yea the set time is come, when the heathen shall fear the name of the Lord, and all the kings of the earth his glory[h]."

With the view of exciting the zealous union of Christians in this great object, and of invigorating those efforts which may result from such an union, we are now met together. May the divine blessing crown our feeble endeavours while we point out, First, In what manner we may consecrate our service to the Lord; and, Secondly, What motives and inducements we have to do so.

I. We are first to inquire, *In what manner we may consecrate our service to the Lord?*

It is instructive to observe the unanimity with which the different classes of the people laboured in their respective spheres, as soon as the period arrived for the commencement of the work. The inhabitants bring their contributions; the labourers are busied in their several occupations; the artists in directing; the builders, the masons, the carpenters in executing.

So when the second temple was built under Nehemiah, "while the one half wrought in the work, the other half held the spears and the shields[i]." While some stood over and directed the labourers, others sounded the trumpet. These all, "having a mind to the work," effected their purpose, notwithstanding the incessant opposition of their enemies. The rebuilding of the city and temple was the common cause by which they were animated; and though it must be allowed that some sustained a more honourable character, and were allotted to a more prominent

[g] Ps. cii. 13. [h] ib. 15. [i] Neh. iv. 16.

prominent station than others, yet the work was completed by the zealous co-operation of the whole body, each individual contributing his best efforts in the line of his own peculiar exertions.

Thus it is with the work in which we are engaged. The great object we have in view is one viz.; The erection of a spiritual temple to God: but there are different ways in which we may contribute to this object. An opportunity is afforded to all of us of setting our hands to the work. We shall specify a few distinct branches of the service.

1. The most honourable and arduous department of the service is that of the labourers themselves; of those, I mean, who go forth into the heathen countries, in the face of dangers and of death, to serve God in the Gospel of his Son. All the plans of the Society must necessarily be abortive, unless persons be found, who are willing thus to "consecrate their service to the Lord." "For how shall the Gentiles call on him in whom they have not believed, and of whom they have not heard?" Blessed be God! some are actually engaged in this honourable department. We have thankfully heard of the success which has crowned their labours, and our hearts are animated with the prospect of their increased usefulness.

Still it is to be lamented that the labourers are but few: men of piety and talents are greatly wanted for the furtherance of the work: and those who are on the point of entering into the Ministry, or who have but recently undertaken that honourable office, are earnestly invited to turn their attention to this subject. When it pleases God to unite so many thousands of his people in promoting the work of Missions, we ought to reflect that a new door of usefulness is opened; and it becomes every Minister to inquire how far this circumstance is a call from God to him:—a most weighty inquiry this, and yielding only in importance to that which respects our personal interest in the Gospel. We are aware that nothing can be affirmed as a general rule for the solution of this

this important question. Whatever observations are suggested, many considerations peculiar to the individual must concur in bringing the mind to a decision. In all such deliberations however, it is of vast importance that we form a just estimate of the Missionary character. Some, in considering the necessary qualifications for this office, search only for the evidences of true piety. In their zeal for vital religion, they overtook other qualities essential to a Minister of this high class. Personal religion is indeed indispensable in the Christian Minister: but the man of God, who would labour in the trying and arduous sphere of a Missionary, must also be peculiarly *apt to teach*: his heart must be inflamed with the love of Christ, and filled with a tender concern for the conversion of men; in the pursuit of which great object, he must be courageous in enduring hardships, and patient under circumstances of trial. While his measures are planned with caution, they must be conducted with prudence, and maintained with a holy zeal and perseverance.

On the other hand, some persons entertain too formidable a view of the subject. They not only search for those grand requisites which have been mentioned, but expect that the will of God is to be manifested in some extraordinary and sensible manner; that their minds are to be irresistibly drawn to the work; and that Divine Providence is by some miraculous interference to mark out the path of duty. Certainly we ought, in all our ways, to acknowledge God, and should be particularly careful, in a step of this nature, not to run without being sent; but at the same time, let us not tempt God; let us not wait for interpositions which he has no where promised. Where the mind is fully satisfied respecting its own views, and those views are encouraged by the concurrent approbation of our most pious and judicious friends, we can scarcely be justified in waiting for any other intimations of the Divine will, than those which accord with the ordinary operations of Providence.

Should

Should there be any here present, who are now deliberating on this important subject, it must afford them great consolation to reflect, that many pious Christians are at this very time bearing them on their minds, and praying on their behalf that the Lord would direct their path. May all your difficulties be removed, and may your deliberations be overruled for good!

2. A second department of the service consists in *the benevolent exertions of those who undertake the management of the Missionary concerns.*

The labour of conducting these is not to be conceived by persons who do not actually bear a part in them. To a superficial observer the business appears to be of easy conception and of quick dispatch; but, on a more attentive survey, it will be found to branch out into a variety of particulars, which require great exertions, and a considerable sacrifice of time: such, for instance, as the selection of persons to the arduous office of Missionaries; the appointment of their respective destinations; the conveyance of suitable instruction to them for the more advantageous discharge of their duty; the conducting of an extensive correspondence; the determination of every difficulty referred to their judgment; in short, the sustaining of what St. Paul himself called the greatest of his labours, the "care of all the Churches[k]," wheresoever planted: these, attended as they must be with constant anxiety, and followed by frequent disappointment, constitute the leading cares of the department which we are now considering. In the prosecution of such labours, difficulties will occur, productive often of uneasiness and discouragement; those, I mean, which result from the too sanguine temperament of some, and the instability or indiscretion of others. To counteract and remedy the evils that arise, and to regulate such complicated affairs to the greatest advantage, must of necessity require much wisdom, much firmness, much support from Heaven. Happily for us, many Christians distinguished for piety,

[k] 2 Cor. xi. 28.

piety, and highly respectable from their rank in life, have come forward, and voluntarily undertaken this labour of love; the value of whose services can only be appreciated by considering, that on them, as the main spring, depends, in great measure, under God, the whole success of our endeavours.

But while we rejoice in the unwearied labours of those who have already united in this glorious cause, we cannot but hope that others possessed of property and leisure will be found to encourage them by their presence, and aid them by their counsels. It is recorded to the disgrace of some nobles, that, at the rebuilding of Jerusalem, "they put not their necks to the work of their Lord[1]." While the people were diligently employed in raising the walls of the city, they themselves, destitute alike of patriotic ardour and religious zeal, remained inactive. Let their example operate as a caution to us. Now while the work of God is advancing, let us consider how far we may add our personal assistance towards its speedy and more enlarged accomplishment.

3. A third department of the work consists in *pecuniary contributions.*

It must be obvious to all, that no effectual measures can be adopted by the Society, without an ample contribution to its funds. At a period like the present, when the furnishing of one single Missionary cannot be accomplished without a considerable expense, how can the extensive plans of the Society be carried into effect without the utmost efforts of the Christian world? Great indeed have been the efforts already made; efforts which we contemplate with admiration, and record with gratitude. That, notwithstanding past encouragement, we embrace this opportunity of appealing to the liberality of the public, is to be ascribed not to any diminution of zeal in those who have hitherto contributed their support, but to the augmented expenditure of the Society. Indeed, its operations are conducted upon so large a scale, and its prospect of

[1] Neh. iii. 5.

of usefulness is so extended, as to require the most strenuous exertions of those who are friends to the Cause.

It is therefore not without reason that your assistance is solicited upon this occasion. And this, we may observe, is a department of the service to which every one may contribute his portion of aid. We are informed, that when the tabernacle was preparing in the wilderness, "the children of Israel brought a willing offering unto the Lord, every man and woman whose heart made them willing to bring for all manner of work which the Lord had commanded to be made[m]." Those who could not bring offerings of gold, brought blue, and purple, and fine linen. Even the women contributed the work of their hands: some brought that which they had spun, of blue and purple; others spun goats' hair. If, on the present occasion, a similar zeal prevailed amongst us, we are persuaded the most important benefits would result to the general cause, without any considerable sacrifice of individual comfort. Let every one exert himself according to his ability. We read of some indeed, who went "beyond their ability[n]," in sending pecuniary relief to their afflicted brethren;—such is the nature and exercise of fervent love. Let us emulate their noble example. He that hath but little, let him impart of that little. The widow's mite will be received into the treasury with thankfulness, and the accumulation of benefactions, however small, will form an important addition to the resources of the Society.

4. A fourth department consists, *in the union of our prayers for the success of Missionary labours.* If there should be any amongst us unable to aid the work, in either of the methods before mentioned, this at least is a part of the service from which none of us is exempted. And who can tell what blessings might be imparted, in answer to the united supplications of Christians through the land? Blessed be our God! considerable progress has been already made

[m] Exod. xxxv. 29. [n] 2 Cor. viii. 3.

made in this desired co-operation. A Missionary spirit has been excited, and the prayers of pious Christians have ascended to the throne of God, to an extent almost unexampled in this country. And one happy effect of these Annual Meetings has been, to diffuse a lively interest in the Cause of Missions throughout the religious world. O that this interest were still more widely spread, and that with one accord we might all "continue together in prayer and supplication, until the Spirit be poured down upon us from on high!"

Is there not reason to regret that our prayers have been too formal, and languid, and unbelieving? O let us engage in this work like persons who are bent on prevailing with God; like persons who believe in that gracious promise of our Redeemer, that if "even two shall agree on earth, as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of their Father who is in heaven[o]." Consider what encouragement our God has given us to plead this particular Cause before him: "Ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence. Give him no rest, till he establish, and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth[p]."

It is not *fervour* only that we need to cultivate in our petitions, but a holy *constancy* and *perseverance*. Our blessed Lord has charged us to "pray always, and not to faint[q];" and if we would effectually promote the work of God, our concern for it should be wrought into a habit, and our supplications be not *occasional* merely, but *stated*. This important subject should form a prominent part of our devotions in the family, and in the closet. It has often been suggested from the pulpit and the press, that the close of the Sunday evening might be most conveniently set apart for supplicating the Divine Majesty, in behalf of the benighted heathen.

On these occasions, let us recollect, that if we engage in prayer with holy earnestness, we shall not content ourselves with a general expression of our wishes,

[o] Mat. xviii. 19. [p] Isai. lxii. 6, 7. [q] Luke xviii. 1.

wishes, but enter minutely into the detail of our wants. It is not the transient mention of Missionary labours in our prayers that forms that co-operation of which we speak: we should endeavour to be minute, and enlarged in our petitions: we should unite our supplications for the Divine blessing on every department of the service; that men may be stirred up to bring their free-will offerings to the Lord; that a more extended and active interest in the work may be excited through the land; that those who engage in the direction of the Society may combine their talents with cordiality, with zeal, with prudence, and with success; that the Lord would pour out his Spirit upon us, and send forth labourers into the harvest[r]; and finally, that he would endue all those who have devoted themselves to the work with a "spirit of power and of love, and of a sound mind[s];" that he would make them as "polished shafts in his quiver[t]," and crown their labours with his blessing.

Who then, amongst *you*, is willing thus to consecrate his service to the Lord? When shall our prayers be thus fervent, thus constant, thus enlarged, for the welfare of Zion? When shall all our hearts reply to the divine call in the text,—Lord, "here am I, send me;" "Lord, what wilt thou have *me* to do in this important service?" "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth."

Having then, as we proposed, stated in what manner we may consecrate our service to the Lord, we proceed to consider,

II. Secondly, What motives and inducements we have to do so. When we consider the glorious object of those exertions which we are now labouring to promote, so many powerful motives crowd in upon the mind, that we are at a loss how to enter upon this part of our subject. In applying the question of the text, Who is willing to consecrate his service to the Lord?—to the cause of Missions? Methinks,

[r] Matt. ix. 38. [s] 2 Tim. i. 7. [t] Isai. xlix. 2.

Methinks, all the generous feelings of the heart are interested. If the motives to a charitable exertion rise in proportion to the necessities of them who are to be relieved, and the value of the relief to be administered;—if in a cause, where humanity pleads, honour stimulates, and duty binds, it is base to be indifferent, and criminal to be inactive; if the "luxury of doing good" possess any allurements, or the ties of gratitude any authority; if, in short, there be "any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies[a]," —how can we produce a case more pregnant with constraining motives than the present?

Consider, first, That in extending the Gospel, we *impart the richest of all benefits.* The present age, amidst all its vices, is confessedly distinguished by the number of its Charitable Institutions. Many successful appeals have been made in behalf of the afflicted, to the benevolence and sympathy of the public; and new Institutions are continually forming for the relief of human misery. In surveying this great metropolis, we view with delight the asylums for the helpless orphan, and the desolate widow: we behold numerous edifices for the reception of the diseased, the maimed, the blind, the deaf, the dumb, the insane. Could we actually introduce into your presence a number of these unhappy sufferers, methinks there is scarcely one amongst us who would not melt at the sight of human woe, under such affecting forms: nor is there one who would not entertain the highest esteem for those benevolent exertions which might tend to alleviate their sorrows.

But, viewing the subject in its proper light, we plead in behalf of objects far more pitiable than these. A diseased organ, a mutilated limb, and a debilitated frame, greatly as they excite our compassion, are incomparably less to be dreaded than a spiritual death, a "death in trespasses and sins." Who that considers the miserable condition of the unregenerate, as being "without Christ, aliens from the

[a] Phil. ii. 1.

the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenant of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world[x]," can doubt that, in dispensing the word of life to the heathen, we impart relief as much superior to that which is administered to the body, as spiritual things are more excellent than temporal, or the heavens are higher than the earth? The poor paralytic who was brought to our Lord, received a far more valuable benefit in the pardon of his sins, than in the renewal of his bodily strength. "Son, thy sins be forgiven thee," conveyed solid comfort to his soul, a blessing rich in its nature, and durable in its effects.

In whatever view we contemplate the heathen nations, it must be evident that in conveying to them the glad tidings of salvation, we confer upon them the richest of all blessings. If we consider them as *plunged in brutal ignorance*, do we not confer a rich blessing when we bring them to know their Creator, and the ends for which they were made; when we make them sensible of the real dignity of their nature as formed for the enjoyment of God, and of the degradation of that nature by the fall of man; when we exhibit the means provided for their recovery, and lead them to the knowledge of God as reconciled to them in Christ Jesus? If we consider them as the *wretched slaves of sin, and as walking according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that worketh in all the children of disobedience*, do we not confer inestimable benefits, in conveying to them those lively oracles by which they may be delivered from the tyranny of their lusts, and by which their souls may be renewed after the image of God? If Moses imparted a great benefit to the Israelites, when he lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, how much richer blessings are communicated, when Christ Jesus is exhibited crucified before the eyes of perishing sinners! Or if we consider them as the *deluded votaries of false gods*; do we not confer a rich

[x] Eph. ii. 12.

a rich blessing on the self-torturing devotee, when we bring him to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, as "the way, the truth, and the life;" when we deliver him from those superstitious terrors by which he is goaded, making him acquainted with the Gospel of peace, and introducing him into "the glorious liberty of the children of God?"

How can we sufficiently prize these inestimable blessings! This is not merely to humanize the brute, or to civilize the barbarian; it is to "raise the poor from the dunghill, and set him among princes;" it is to pluck the brands out of the fire, and exalt them to a crown of glory. If one such instance only had occurred since the institution of the Society, it would be a glorious recompence for all its exertions: but, blessed be God! authentic accounts have reached us of many who have received the truth as it is in Jesus. Many an idolatrous, sensualized Pagan has been made to renounce the work of darkness, to turn from idols, and to serve the Living God. Many a filthy, stupid, and indolent Hottentot (as far as human judgment can ascertain the fact) has been savingly enlightened by the Gospel: his heart has been purified by faith, his habits reformed, and he has exhibited in life and death the holy nature and divine support of the Gospel.

Name, my Brethren, if possible, a charity more exalted than this. This is indeed to fulfil prophecy, by making "the lame man to leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb to sing; for in the wilderness, waters break out, and streams in the desert: the parched ground becomes a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water." The Society is willing then to diffuse these blessings still more widely. Can we be indifferent to the propagation of all this happiness? Can we forbear to give a helping hand to this good work? Possessing, as we do, the fullest enjoyment of these privileges, do we grudge to give them out of our abundance? Who then, that is not altogether destitute of divine philanthrophy, is not willing,

willing, yea desirous, to consecrate his service to the Lord, and contribute towards the diffusion of such unspeakable blessings?

Consider, secondly, that in labouring for the conversion of the Heathen, we *imitate the brightest of all examples.*

It highly concerns us as Christians to look unto Jesus, and to walk in his steps. And what was the distinguishing feature of his character? what was his great object in life and death? Hear his own account of himself,—"The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which is lost[y]." In all that he did and suffered, he manifested the most disinterested, self-denying love for perishing sinners. For them he took upon himself our nature: "though rich, yet for their sakes he became poor, that they through his poverty might be rich[z]." With them he maintained the most familiar intercourse, insomuch that he was called the "friend of publicans and sinners[a]." For them,—what can I say more? he became "obedient unto death, even the death of the cross[b]."

Now it is our duty to resemble him to the uttermost, according to our own opportunities and "to the ability which God has given us." "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus[c]." It is also our highest honour to exercise the same dispositions, and abound in the same virtues. Since therefore, in proportion as we laboriously engage in the work of God, and cheerfully bear our cross for the salvation of men, we most nearly copy his bright example, it follows that the post of greatest danger, of the severest suffering, and of the most painful self-denial, is the POST OF HONOUR.

And who occupies this post so truly as the Missionary? Relinquishing the attractions of polished life, or at least the comforts of civilized society, and abandoning the protection of a well-regulated Government, he transports himself to the deserts, and there takes up his abode with the untutored, lawless savages.

[y] Luke xix. 10. [z] 2 Cor. viii. 9. [a] Matt. xi. 19.
[b] Phil. ii. 8. [c] ib. v. 5.

savages. Animated with zeal for the glory of his God, and impelled by the constraining love of Christ, he penetrates the recesses of the wilderness. There he collects the wondering barbarians, and spreads before them "the unsearchable riches of Christ[d]." He "takes pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake[e]:"—though harassed by frequent journeyings, and "constantly exposed to perils by the heathen, and perils in the wilderness; though often in weariness, in painfulness, in watchings, in hunger and thirst, in fastings, in cold and nakedness[f];" yet "none of these things move him, neither counts he his life dear unto himself, so that he may finish his course with joy, and the ministry which he has received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the Gospel of the grace of God[g]." Thus he "serves the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears and temptations[h]:" he could almost "wish himself accursed, after the example of St. Paul[i]," for the sake of the perishing heathen; and is willing to do any thing, and to suffer any thing, so that he may save some.—THIS IS THE POST OF HONOUR.

It must be acknowledged that very few persons are fitted or designed for a situation like this; but such an one (wherever he is to be found) certainly exhibits the most striking resemblance of our blessed Lord, who "for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame." But because the arduous office of a Minister is allotted to few, must it therefore be affirmed that we are not all permitted to attain to the high honour of resembling the Saviour? Though we cannot follow him in the honourable and self-denying course of a Missionary, we may still, in a lower sense, copy the example of Christ. If we cannot go forth as God's ambassadors, we may yet exercise the same love and zeal in the service of our God; we may "follow his

[d] Eph. iii. 8. [e] 2 Cor. xii. 10. [f] 2 Cor. xi. 26, 27.
[g] Acts xx. 24. [h] ib. ver. 19 [i] Rom. ix. 3.

his steps, and walk as he walked." We may be seeking and promoting the welfare of souls according to the opportunities afforded us. We may be improving our talents, and contributing all the helps in our power towards the furtherance of the great ends of his incarnation and death. How ought this motive to weigh with us! How ought the consideration of our Lord's great example to fill us with a holy ambition to be merciful as he is merciful, and perfect as he is perfect! If the Chief Shepherd has indeed carried us home on his shoulders rejoicing,—how ought we to promote those labours in the wilderness, which are calculated to add other sheep to his fold! Can we be indifferent in this matter? Are we possessed of no elevation of spirit, no aspiring thoughts after a nearer and increasing conformity to our Lord and Saviour? *Who then is willing to attain to this honour, by consecrating his service to the Lord?*

3. But we observe further, that, above all, *by the extension of the Gospel we most eminently promote the glory of our God.* This was evidently David's great object, in his contributions towards building the temple. Such was his affection for the house of God, such was his zeal for the extension of true religion, such his earnest desire that God should be exalted in the earth, that he thought no sacrifice too great for the attainment of these ends. But is not the glory of God more eminently concerned in the work for which our contributions are now required? The erection of a splendid edifice was, *in itself considered,* unimportant; for the "Most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands[k]." "Wheresoever I have walked with all Israel," said the Lord, "spake I a word to any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to feed my people, saying, Why have ye not built me a house of cedars[l]?" It should also be considered, that the children of Israel were already possessed of that from whence the temple itself derived all its importance; for the ark, which was the sacred symbol of the Divine presence and favour, had

[k] Acts vii. 48. [l] 1 Chron. xvii. 6.

had resided among them for a long course of years. But, in the height of his zeal, David thought it became one so highly favoured as he had been, to establish religion in the most effectual manner; and hoped that the extraordinary grandeur of the temple might both secure his people's attachment to the divine laws, and also attract the surrounding nations to the worship of the True God. The temple was moreover suited to a dispensation which in its nature was temporary and external; and it was intended to typify by its extraordinary magnificence the surpassing glory of Christ and his Church.

But if the Divine glory was concerned in the erection of the material temple, how much more is it interested in the formation of that Church which the temple prefigured? If the shadow of good things was glorious, the substance exceeds in glory. How is God exalted when the Redeemer's kingdom is extended by the conversion of Gentile sinners from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God! Yes, Brethren, we would erect a nobler temple than Solomon's; we would be the honoured instruments of rendering the hearts of the poor heathen a "habitation of God, through the Spirit." We would raise an altar at which God shall be worshipped "in Spirit and in truth;" and where the offerers shall present unto him "the sacrifices of a broken and contrite spirit," infinitely more precious in his eyes than the blood of bulls and goats, or the most costly burnt-offerings under that law. We would visit those who are sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, and cause the Sun of Righteousness to arise with healing in his wings. We would hasten the accomplishment of that glorious promise, "The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose: it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing: the glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon; for they shall see the glory of the Lord, and the excellency of our God."

It

It is not possible to conceive in what manner the glory of God is more promoted, than by the extension of Missionary labours. He is glorified in *us* by the very exercise of that zeal and love which is the principle of our exertions. For "herein is my Father glorified," saith Christ, "that ye bear much fruit." What fruit so pleasing, so excellent, as love, disinterested and fervent love, the love of Christ, constraining us to make his name known upon earth, and his saving health amongst all nations? And he is glorified in *those whom we visit*, when the heart of the repenting savage becomes changed, and he learns to look upward, in the language of prayer and praise; when his unruly passions are tamed, and his wretched habits reformed, by the "effectual working of God's mighty power." How unspeakably glorious does the Gospel appear, when it becomes the power of God unto salvation; when prejudices are overruled, ignorance dispelled, vices reformed, superstitions abandoned, and all the works of darkness destroyed by its holy and transforming influence; when the nauseous, disgusting Boscheman learns to bow the knee before his God, and offers that praise which honours him; when he becomes clothed with the garments of salvation, and, "with open face, beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, he is changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." Are we stating here an imaginary case? Is this an ideal picture? Let the records of a very recent period establish the fact. Whoever peruses the Rev. Mr. Kircherer's Narrative of his Mission to the Hottentots, will find abundant confirmation of the reality of such a change. In one particular passage he presents this work in so animating a form, that I cannot refrain from recalling it to your minds. In page 44 of the Second Volume of the Missionary Transactions, we meet with the following passage:—"At the close of this, as on all sacred days, it was truly affecting to behold the whole congregation, immediately after service, dispersing over the fields and hills, in order

to

to meditate and pray over what they had heard and enjoyed. I give them the example, and they all follow me. Wherever I go, I meet with stragglers, engaged in solitary meditation; or lying on the ground, behind the bushes, or between the clefts of rocks, pouring out their souls to God in prayer."

Now, be it remembered, that these glorious transactions took place on Hottentot ground, where human nature is degraded and brutalized to a degree inconceivable by us who have been conversant only with civilized life. Are not our hearts revived with the glad tidings? And should not Institutions which tend thus to spread the glory of the Divine name be supported with cheerfulness and cordiality? When we see God honoured in the salvation of souls, when we see him had in reverence by those idolatrous heathen, can we want a motive or inducement to consecrate our services to him? O with what joy do the inhabitants of heaven witness scenes like this! If there be "joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth[m]," that joy, we may reasonably suppose, is increased, in proportion to the depth of degradation and wretchedness from whence the sinner is rescued. Considering them as "ministering spirits, sent forth to minister unto them that shall be heirs of salvation[n]," with what delight do they observe the first symptoms of contrition in one of those wretched prodigals! With what rapture do they anticipate the happiness of the new-born saint! How eagerly do they announce the Redeemer's triumphs in the courts of heaven! The "flying joy" is quickly transmitted and expressed, in adoring Hallelujahs, through every part of those holy regions.

Such are the blessings, then, which we are now invited to communicate. Our object is to produce more of this holy joy in the courts of heaven, and erect fresh trophies to the power and grace of Christ: we long to hasten forward that happy period when earth shall be full of the "knowledge of the Lord, as

[m] Luke xv. 10. [n] Heb. i. 14.

as the waters cover the sea[o];" and when the angels, enraptured with the glorious spectacle, shall shout aloud, "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever[p]!"

Thus we have noticed some of those motives and inducements why we should consecrate our service to the Lord. Whether we consider that, by the extension of Missionary labours, we impart the richest of all benefits, resemble the brightest of all examples, or advance the glory of our God, we are furnished, in each case, with an inducement that should operate most powerfully on our minds. How much more ought we to engage in the work of God, when all these motives conspire and harmonize; when they concentrate their force, and summon all the powers of our soul into exertion! Permit me again to ask, therefore, Who is willing to come forward? Who is willing THIS DAY? *Now* the appeal is made to us; *now* an opportunity of effectual co-operation is afforded;—the heathen are perishing; the labour of rescuing them is begun; the people of God are assembled:—Shall we withhold our exertions? Shall we be lukewarm in a Cause like this? Shall we not be of one heart and mind in encouraging a work so productive of "glory to God in the highest, of peace on earth, of good-will towards men?"

Before we close our discourse, we would observe that the subject we have considered suggests,

1. A word of REPROOF to those who are indisposed to the service of God. However painful the reflection, is there not reason to fear that there are some amongst us in whom all the enlivening motives that have been now urged, have excited no devout ardour, no suitable affections? Ah, degenerate souls! insensible alike to the voice of humanity, the ties of gratitude, the love of your Saviour, and the honour of God. What! have you *no* desire to impart to others the riches of the Gospel? *No* holy breathings after a conformity to your Lord and Saviour? *No* concern

[o] Isai. xi. 9. [p] Rev. xi. 15.

concern for the Divine glory? The absence of these affections is indeed a dreadful calamity; and it is of the utmost importance that we examine into its cause. In 2 Cor. viii. 5. the Apostle, speaking of the liberality of the Macedonian churches, observes, that they "first gave their ownselves to the Lord." From this cordial surrender of themselves, as from a lively and prolific root, sprang all that affectionate concern, and those self-denying exertions for which they were so conspicuous. Is there not too much reason to apprehend that you have neglected this important matter? Judge yourselves, Brethren, that ye be not judged of the Lord. Acknowledge your past transgressions, and this day join yourselves to the Lord, in a perpetual covenant, not to be forgotten.

The subject *reproves* not merely the careless and *insensible*, but the *slothful Christian*. It is a melancholy truth, that the children of this world are "wiser in their generation than the children of light." Ah! what reason have Christians to be ashamed that their zeal for God is so languid and inoperative! How have we dishonoured the Christian profession, by our stupid indifference in the service of God! Instead of being awake to the calls of duty and love, how have the constraining motives of the Gospel remained entombed, as it were, in our bosoms! How little has our gratitude corresponded with the astonishing mercies we have received; or our zeal, with the important services to which we are called. Let us be ashamed of our tardiness; let us now, at length, shake off our stupor, and arise, with the help of God, to a more lively, active, and vigorous prosecution of our Christian race: let us awake, and look about us, that we may discover what may be done for God; and O that in the day of his coming, we may be found "abounding in the work of the Lord!"

But, as was observed in the beginning of the discourse, I would hope that the great majority of the present congregation are, in a measure, alive to those motives by which the text has been enforced. Believing therefore that we are assembled with the

view

view of rendering to God the services we are able, we would add, that the subject suggests also,

2. A word of CONGRATULATION.—Is there not reason of congratulation, my Christian Brethren, that the Most High God condescends to accept our poor services? Who are we, that we should be so honoured as to be permitted in any way to promote the glory of God? What can we present unto the Lord that we have not first received at his hands? Let us then bless and praise our God, that he indulges us with this opportunity of contributing our feeble aids to the advancement of his glory. And now that it has pleased God to appeal to our *willingness*, let us manifest the deep sense we entertain of the honour so conferred, by examining how that willingness may be best proved, and by liberally bestowing according to our ability. We would here again refer you to the animating example of king David. The liberal contributions of the temple were no sooner collected, than that monarch united with his subjects in blessing God for the favour vouchsafed unto them, in giving a willing heart for the service, and in accepting their offering: "The people rejoiced for that they offered willingly, because with perfect heart they offered willingly to the Lord: and David the king also rejoiced with great joy." Anticipating amongst you some portion of his success, we desire, like him, to ascribe the glory to God; and I therefore intreat you, Brethren, no longer to listen to *me* as addressing myself to *you*, but to unite *with me* in addressing *his* thanksgiving to our God and Father:—"Blessed be thou, Lord God of Israel our Father, for ever and ever! Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine: thine is the kingdom, O Lord, and thou art exalted as head above all. Now therefore, our God, we thank thee, and praise thy glorious name. But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly after this sort? for all things come

of

of thee, and of thine own have we given thee. O Lord our God, all this store, that we have prepared to build thee an house for thine holy name, cometh of thine hand, and is all thine own. O Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, our fathers, keep this for ever in the imagination of the thoughts of the heart of thy people, and prepare their heart unto thee[q]!" Amen and Amen.

[q] 1 Chron. xxix. 10—18.

CCLXIX.

LIBERALITY IN GOD'S SERVICE COMMENDED.

1 Chron. xxix. 17, 18. *Now have I seen with joy thy people which are present here to offer willingly unto thee. O Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, our fathers, keep this for ever in the imagination of the thoughts of the heart of thy people, and prepare their heart unto thee!*

RELIGION, in whomsoever it is seen, is exceeding beautiful; and all its exercises and operations deserve our most attentive regard. But when it shines forth in persons of high station, or is exhibited in the united efforts of a multitude, it excites our highest admiration. Who can behold the three thousand converts on the day of Pentecost, "all of one heart and one soul," all living together in the devoutest fellowship with God and each other[a], and dividing with each other their possessions, that, being supported out of one common stock[b], they might be entirely freed from all care about the things of this world; who can behold this, I say, and not admire "the exceeding grace of God in them?" In the chapter before us we have a powerful monarch at the head of all the chief men in his kingdom, devoting their property to God, for the purpose of erecting a stately edifice to his honour. The prayer which David offered on the occasion, in the hearing of them all, expressed, doubtless, their sentiments as well as his own, and shews that they were actuated, not by warm affections only, but by a just and

[a] Acts ii. 41—47. [b] Acts iv. 32—34.

and heavenly principle: for, while they were performing a most exalted act of piety towards God, they were not elated with pride, but filled with gratitude to him for enabling and inclining them to render him this service.

In discoursing on the words which we have just read, we shall consider them,

I. In reference to the history before us—

David had purposed to build a house unto the Lord: but his intention, though approved and applauded by his God, was not suffered to be carried into execution, "because he had been a man of war, and had shed much blood." Nevertheless he made great preparations for it, in order that he might at least testify the sincerity of his wishes, and facilitate the accomplishment of them in God's appointed time. The princes and people heartily concurred with him in this good work; and thereby filled his soul with joy and gratitude. We may notice in the text,

1. The grounds of his joy—

[His subjects manifested on this occasion an extraordinary *zeal for God's honour*, and *liberality in his service*. Had they been disposed to excuse themselves from engaging in this expensive work, they might have urged many specious reasons for declining it. They might have said, 'God has not required this at our hands; why then should we do it? His "ark has abode within curtains" for five hundred years; why then should it not continue to do so? Must not any building which we can raise, be altogether unworthy of his notice? Have we not other, and more imperious, calls for our money? Have we not many poor, whom we might relieve; and many ignorant, for whom we might provide instruction? Besides, have not our families a claim upon us, that we should not so prodigally lavish the wealth by which we are enabled to provide for them?' But no such objections were made. A desire to glorify God swallowed up every selfish and worldly consideration; and the people vied with each other in contributing to the utmost of their power, insomuch that above thirty millions in gold and silver were dedicated by them to this service.

And was not this a proper ground of joy to the pious monarch? It was *at least a presumptive proof that their souls were penetrated with true religion*. Some indeed might have been influenced

influenced by baser motives; but the greater part were doubtless animated by love to God: for they had been long amassing riches for this particular end: and, if their principle had not been good, it would scarcely have operated so uniformly and to such an extent. What then could afford a more just occasion of joy than such a sight, whether to a Prince among his subjects, or a Minister among his people, or a Parent among his children? Every one in whom true piety exists, must of necessity rejoice in beholding such a testimony of piety in others. But the people's conduct was also *a pledge that the grand design should in due time be completed.* David had set his heart on having the work accomplished, though it was not to be performed by him, or even during his life. Large as his own donations had been, they would not have been sufficient without the aid of others: and if his own example had not been followed while he was present to exert his influence, he could have but little hope that any attention would be paid to it after his death. But no room for such fears was left. The people's zeal and liberality insured success: and nothing remained, but that the plan which God himself had given him for every part of the work, should be executed by Solomon his son. Well might he rejoice in such a prospect. Well might he exult in the thought, that in this amazing undertaking he had not laboured in vain or run in vain.]

2. The expressions of his love—

[Good impressions, especially when our temporal interests are likely to be affected by them, are very apt to languish and decay. As the gratitude of the Israelites, promising as it appeared at the first moment when their enemies were overwhelmed in the sea, vanished within the space of a few days, so the zeal and liberality which are called forth on some particular occasions are too often found to yield after a time to the suggestions of prudence and economy. None but God can "put a good desire into the heart[c];" nor can any but God preserve it there. Under a full conviction of this truth, David intreated God to "keep these good dispositions in the hearts of his people," and to "prepare more fully and entirely their hearts unto him." The accumulation of words which he uses on this occasion suggests, that, if there be not a living principle of piety in the heart, the actings of it will be of short continuance; if there be no spring or fountain, the channel will soon cease to flow.

Now this devout application to God on their behalf was the strongest possible expression of his love towards them: for what other thing could tend so much either to their present or eternal felicity as a continuance of these liberal and devout affections? *It conduced exceedingly to their present happiness.* From the joy which they manifested on the occasion, it might be supposed

[c] 2 Cor. viii. 16.

posed rather that they had unexpectedly *acquired* some large property. *This* would have been a more common and natural source of joy. But they felt happiness in *parting with* their wealth: they found it "more blessed to give than to receive:" they experienced a more refined and elevated pleasure than the largest acquisitions could possibly have conveyed[d]. And, instead of thinking that they conferred any obligation upon God by these sacrifices, they felt themselves indebted to him, in exact proportion to the cheerfulness and liberality with which they were enabled to offer to him[e]. Moreover *it tended also to their eternal happiness*. Their gifts could not purchase heaven, it is true; nor could their liberality *merit* any thing at God's hands: but God has been graciously pleased to say, that even "a cup of cold water, if given to him, or for his sake, in a becoming manner, shall in no wise lose its reward:" nay, he would consider himself as "unrighteous, if he were to forget our works and labours of love which we have shewn towards his name[f]." Without arrogating any *merit* to ourselves therefore, we may say, that "the fruits of generosity shall abound to our account[g];" that "what we lay out for the Lord shall be repaid us again[h];" and that in being ready to distribute our wealth in his service, we "lay up in store for ourselves a good foundation against the time to come, that we may lay hold on eternal life[hh]."

On these accounts David prayed that these holy dispositions might be kept alive in their hearts; and in this prayer he expressed in the most effectual manner his love towards them. If he had flattered them, he might have gratified their pride; but in praying for them he consulted their best interests.]

Having noticed the words in reference to the history before us, we shall consider them,

II. In reference to that which is typically represented by it—***

The

[d] 2 Cor. viii. 9. [e] ver. 14. [f] Heb. vi. 10.
[g] Phil. iv. 17. [h] Prov. xix. 17. [hh] 1 Tim. vi. 18, 19.

*** If this were the subject of a Sermon for *Charity* or *Sunday Schools*, the words following the text, "*And give unto Solomon my Son a perfect heart*," should form a part of the text. Then the second head might be treated in reference to, 1st, The Christian Church; and 2dly, The souls of men. *Under the former* of these the propriety of supporting Missions might be stated; and *under the latter*, (see 1 Cor. vi. 19. & 1 Pet. ii. 4, 5.) the importance of having the soul built up as an habitation for God. The necessity of postponing all other considerations to *this* may be shewn from hence, that if David *disposed of his wealth* so liberally for the constructing of an edifice of stone for God, much more should we *disregard the acquiring of wealth* in comparison of making our souls a temple for

The material temple was a type of the Christian Church, even of that temple which is "built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone[i]."

This temple we are now called upon to build—

[God has of late years stirred up an almost unprecedented zeal to erect this temple in heathen lands. Every denomination of Christians has stood forth on this occasion. The Moravians, with unrivalled perseverance, led the way. Independents and Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians, have followed, according to their respective abilities. The Church of England has long had two Societies engaged in this glorious cause[k]: and of late a third has arisen, whose attention is principally directed to AFRICA and THE EAST[l]. None of these interfere with each other: there is room for all; and there is need of all. It might be thought better perhaps if all were combined in one: but, considering what human nature is, we cannot expect that all should so perfectly coalesce, as to prosecute their plans with sufficient unanimity: and it is certain that far greater efforts are likely to be made, when all can exert themselves in a way congenial with their own sentiments, than if they were called upon to support a plan which they did not wholly approve.

That such a spirit should be so generally diffused, must surely be a matter of rejoicing to every one that has the interests of religion at heart. And we trust that, in reference to this assembly, *we* may adopt the words of the text, "Now have I seen with joy thy people which are present here to offer willingly unto thee."]

Let us then imitate the example now set before us:

1. Let us offer willingly—

[Difficulties and objections are very apt to arise in the mind, especially when we want a plea for withholding or limiting our contributions. But what objection can be urged, which would not have had incomparably greater force on the foregoing occasion? Indeed the reasons that should animate us to exertion, are tenfold stronger than any which David could have urged in support

him. A particular address might then be made to the children, to shew them, that the ultimate end of the charity was to put them in the way of obtaining a perfect heart, and that they should concur in this design to the utmost of their power.

[i] Eph. ii. 20.

[k] That for promoting Christian Knowledge; and that for propagating the Gospel in Foreign Parts.

[l] Here an account may be given of what has been done by them.

support of his measure. God might have been known and worshipped even though that costly edifice had not been reared: but how shall he be known among the heathen, if none be sent to instruct them? How could he have been known by *us* when in our heathen state, if none had pitied our ignorance, and laboured for our relief? Since then "we have freely received, should we not freely give?" Though we have too much ignorance at home, yet all have some means of instruction: and there are none so far from God, but that the sound of the Gospel may reach their ears, and convert their souls. But this is not the case with the heathens. If we send them not the light of divine truth, they must abide in darkness and the shadow of death. Let us therefore discard from our minds every thought, except that of zeal for God and compassion for our fellow-creatures. And "let us give not grudgingly, or of necessity; for God loveth a cheerful giver."]

2. Let us offer bountifully—

[If we had been asked, what would be proper for David to give towards the building of the temple, we should probably have thought ten thousand pounds a large sum: we should scarcely have judged it reasonable to require of him so large a subscription as an hundred thousand pounds: yet he not only gave as much as that, but ten times as much; yea, a hundred times as much; yea, almost two hundred times as much. Independent of the immense treasures dedicated as spoils taken from his enemies, he gave, out of his own purse, gold and silver to the amount of above eighteen millions of money. And what was it that prompted him to such astonishing liberality? He himself tells us in the preceding context; "I have prepared with all my might.... *because I have set my affection to the house of my God*[m]." Let the same principle operate in us: let us set our affection to the work of Christ, and the salvation of our fellow-creatures, and then our ability alone will determine the measure of our contributions. Instead of waiting for arguments to overcome a parsimonious and reluctant spirit, we shall be "willing of our ownselves to give, not only according to our ability, but even beyond our proper ability; and with much intreaty we shall urge and compel, as it were, the acceptance of our gifts" for the furthering of this blessed cause[n]. The rich will give largely out of their abundance; and the poor will be casting in their not less acceptable mite; and all will unite in adoring God for the opportunity afforded them to shew their love to him.]

3. Let us give in due order—

[There is an offering which God requires, previous to his acceptance of any other: it is this; "My son, give me thy heart[o]." Here then we must put to *you* the question which David

[m] ver. 2, 3. [n] 2 Cor. viii. 3, 4. [o] Prov. xxiii. 26.

David put to his subjects on that glorious occasion; "Who amongst you is willing to consecrate his service this day unto the Lord[p]?"

Who will consecrate himself to God *as a Christian?* It would be a blessed day indeed, if you were all as unanimous in this, as that assembly were in devoting their treasures unto God. Could we but see you offering to him your hearts, we need not add a word respecting your property; for you would feel that it is not possible to dispose of that in any other way so happily for yourselves, so beneficially for the world, or so honourably to God. Give then, I say, like the Macedonians; of whom St. Paul says, that "out of their deep poverty they abounded unto the riches of liberality:" but, like them, "give *first* YOUR OWN SELVES unto the Lord[q]." Then you will know, that all which you have is his; and make no account of your property, but as it may be subservient to his glory[r].

Permit me to ask further, Who will consecrate himself to God *as a Missionary?* It is in vain that materials are collected for a building, if there be none found to construct the edifice. And alas! here is the difficulty, here the want! Of those who are destined to the service of their God, how few are found willing to sacrifice their earthly prospects, and their carnal ease! When God calls them to an arduous and self-denying service, how do they, like Moses, multiply their excuses, when they are actuated only by a fear of the cross! God has been for many years saying to us of the Established Church, "Who will go for us?" but there have been few Isaiahs found to answer, "Here am I, send me[s]." O that there were less reason for that complaint, "All men seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's[t]!" If we even knew that the fruits of our labours would not appear to any great extent in our day, it were no reason for declining the service to which we are called. David sowed that others might reap: our blessed Lord did the same: I pray God there may be some found amongst us inclined and qualified to follow their examples.]

TO CONCLUDE—

[If there be any, whether in the Ministry or out of it, who desire to be the Lord's, we pray that "our Covenant-God would keep this in the imagination of the thoughts of their hearts for ever." And if the raising of God's spiritual temple among the heathen be an object worthy of our regard, let us now vie with each other in our endeavours to promote it, and shew our sense of its importance by the cheerfulness and extent of our donations.]

[p] ver. 5. [q] 2 Cor. viii. 2, 5. see also 1 Pet. ii. 4, 5.
[r] ver. 14, 16. [s] Isai. vi. 8. [t] Phil. ii. 21.

CCLXX.

USE OF CHURCH MUSIC.

2 Chron. v. 13, 14. *It came even to pass, as the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the Lord; and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and praised the Lord, saying, "For He is good; for his mercy endureth for ever;" that then the house was filled with a cloud, even the House of the Lord; so that the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord had filled the house of God.*

EVERY duty which we owe to God is excellent in its season; nor is there any which is not peculiarly suitable for particular persons, and under particular circumstances. Repentance, prayer, attendance on the preached Gospel, are eminently proper not for the ungodly alone, but for the saints also, whenever a sense of ignorance, guilt, or helplessness call for such exercises. But the duty of praise seems to claim a just preference before all others, not only because it is more pleasant, and more comely for the upright, but because in all others we receive from God; whereas in this we give to God. Indeed God himself declares, that he is more especially honoured by the due performance of this duty; "Whoso offereth me praise, glorifieth me:" and in my text, he has given the most abundant testimony of its acceptableness to him.

Solomon having finished the Temple, had now brought up the ark of the Lord, and placed it in the Holy of Holies;—he had also offered innumerable sacrifices on this glorious occasion; and, while he was praising God in concert with the Priests and Levites, and an immense band of vocal and instrumental music, God came down into the Temple, and filled it with his glory; "It came even to pass, as the trumpeters &c. &c."

In discoursing upon these words, we shall consider,

I. The

I. The manner in which they praised God;
II. The subject matter of their praise;
III. The token which God gave them of his approbation.

I. Let us consider the manner in which they praised God—

Never since the creation of the world was there a more glorious display of religious zeal than at the dedication of Solomon's Temple. Solomon had assembled "the Elders of Israel, even the heads of all the tribes, and the chief men in all the families of Israel, to Jerusalem. He had collected also, not the Priests of one particular course, but all the Priests and all the Levites, to assist in this solemnity: and this vast concourse of people, after having deposited the ark in the place prepared for it, joined in praises and thanksgivings to God: they praised God, *unitedly:* we are told that "the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound." It is much to be regretted, that, in our worshipping assemblies, the greater part of the congregation never join in this part of the service: they seem to think, that they are not interested in it, and that it may well be left to those few who may have studied music as a science. But would it not appear absurd in the highest degree, if the prayers also were left to a few select persons, and the bulk of the congregation were to sit still, as though they had no need to join in the devotions? And if this would be so evidently absurd in the one part of the service, why should it not be so in the other? All indeed are not *alike* qualified to join aloud; but there are very few who might not, by a little attention, easily qualify themselves to join in this act of worship; nor can there be any one who is not bound at least to exert his mind, and "make melody in his heart to the Lord." Indeed this is one great use of musical instruments in the public worship; they are serviceable to unite voices which might otherwise be discordant, and to help forward those, who through ignorance or diffidence might otherwise be silent.

Therefore

Therefore David, in the last Psalm, exhorted us to praise the Lord with stringed instruments and with *organs;* and well knowing how easy it would be with such helps to sing, he adds, "Let every thing that hath breath, praise the Lord."

We must not however imagine, that the mere lifting up of the voice is a sacrifice pleasing to God: no; he requires the service of the heart: and therefore we observe, in the next place, that they praised God *devoutly*.

It is said in my text, that the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound "in praising and thanking the Lord."

We know, that the uttering of a prayer without any sense of our need, or any desire of the things we ask for, is no other than a solemn mockery, which is in the highest degree displeasing to God: so the singing of Psalms and Hymns without any sense of joy and gratitude, is an hypocritical service, and wholly unacceptable to God: we may indeed please the congregation, and establish our own reputation for skill; but these are very unworthy motives to be influenced by, when we are solemnly addressing God: persons actuated by such considerations sing to their own praise and glory, rather than to God's; and therefore they must rest satisfied with *their* reward, i.e. the reward they seek after; for it is certain that they will never receive any testimony of God's approbation. Let me therefore remind you all, that the end of singing is to thank and praise the Lord; and that, whenever we join in Psalms and Hymns, we must be especially careful that we "make melody in our hearts to the Lord." In this we shall be greatly assisted by a judicious use of instrumental music;—which leads me to observe further, that the Jewish Assembly praised God WITH INSTRUMENTS OF MUSIC.

Many are prejudiced against church-music; and it is certain, that it is capable of very great abuse: but it may also be employed to great advantage: it is said in my text, that they lifted up their voices with

with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music. Who can doubt but that the devotion of the congregation was greatly aided by these? Who can doubt, but that if the wisest of men, at the most solemn season imaginable, not only used these instruments, but (as we shall have occasion presently to observe) was approved of God in the use of them, who can doubt, I say, but that they may be used to great advantage? As far indeed as they contributed to the pomp and grandeur of the Temple worship, they may well be dispensed with under the Christian dispensation; since the excellence of the Gospel worship consists in its simplicity, in which respect it is directly opposite to the Jewish worship: but, inasmuch as it aided the devotion, its utility remains: and, I trust, that in a little time we shall find that effect arising from it.

In order to this, however, we must learn to distinguish between the natural effect of music on the organs of sense, and the spiritual effect of divine truths upon the soul. Those who attend only to the sound may experience the former; but to experience the latter, we must attend simply to the words we sing. We shall sing to little purpose "with the voice, if we sing not with our understanding also." To promote this, I proceed to set before you,

II. The subject matter of their praise—

A sense of the Divine goodness and mercy was that which inflamed their souls. David had before recorded, in Ps. cxxxvi. the goodness of God, in his works of creation, providence, and redemption; and no less than twenty-six times in as many verses had he repeated that delightful truth, that "the mercy of the Lord endureth for ever." In all probability that psalm was now used by Solomon's appointment; so that with the commemoration of every fresh act of mercy, the whole band united in singing, "For the Lord is good; for his mercy endureth for ever." The grand subject therefore of their praise was, the goodness and mercy of God. And what

abundant

abundant ground was here for praise! Who that surveys the wonders of creation, must not see the goodness of God stamped indelibly on every part of the universe? Who that sees the sun, ruling by day, and the moon and stars, ruling by night; who that sees this terrestrial globe furnished with every thing which can contribute to the happiness both of the rational and irrational creation; who that observes the variety and the beauty of God's works, the fitness of every creature for its use, the subordination of one creature to another, and the joint concurrence of all to one common end; who that observes the fabric of the human body, that is so fearfully and wonderfully made, or reflects on the powers of the soul, which can in an instant soar from earth to heaven, and there contemplate not the heavenly bodies only, but even the Maker of them; who, I say, can view any part of the creation, and not exclaim with the Psalmist, "The Lord is good to all, and his mercy is over all his works?" Nor does his goodness less appear in the works *of Providence:* David, in the psalm we have referred to, recounts most of the gracious acts which God had performed towards the Jewish nation from the first bringing of them out of Egypt to the time he penned that psalm: these were no doubt recited with joy and gladness. And may not we also look back through the annals of our history, and see how often God has preserved us from our enemies, how he has prospered our nation in ten thousand instances, and how he is yet protecting us from foreign invasion and domestic tumults? Do we not see how good he is to us in making the earth to bring forth plenteously, and in providing for all our returning wants? May not every individual amongst us too trace the peculiar kindness of Providence to himself, in averting ills, or overruling them for good? Surely we have all experienced enough of God's goodness to make us joyfully unite in songs of praise. But most of all is the goodness of God conspicuous in the work *of redemption: this* the Psalmist notices particularly, though

though indeed in but few words. The Jews fixed their attention more on the typical redemptions: but now that the shadows are removed, and the substance is set before us, we should survey the redemption of Christ with incessant wonder. Behold the goodness of God in giving us his only Son; in laying our iniquities on him; and in opening the kingdom of heaven to all believers! Behold him satisfying his own justice by the sufferings of his Son, and opening a way for the exercise of his mercy towards us consistently with his other perfections! This is the wonder; this is the bright display of goodness; this is the subject matter of thanksgiving, to all the saints on earth, and all the saints in heaven. O that every tongue might pay its tribute of praise! and that we might all with united hearts and voices proclaim, that "the Lord is good!"

A further subject of their praise was the *mercy* of God, "His mercy endureth for ever." How eminently did this appear in God's dealings with the Jewish nation! for, notwithstanding all their murmurings and rebellions in the wilderness, he brought them into the land which he had promised them: and in due time he raised up his servant David, to whom he had confirmed all the promises which he had made unto the Patriarchs; and now at last he had in a figure taken possession of the Temple of Solomon, as a typical representation of his future dwelling in the temple of Christ's body. These were proofs of the perpetuity of God's mercy, and that he would not withdraw it from those to whom he had promised it. But here again *we* survey his mercy in far brighter colours: we see *indeed* that it endureth for ever: we have seen the mercy promised to our fathers long since performed: we have seen the Son of God, the Saviour of the world; we have seen him living, dying, rising, and resuming his throne of glory: we have seen him making an end of sin, and bringing in an everlasting righteousness; and now we behold him pouring out all the blessings of Redemption on his Church

Church and people. At this moment is his mercy as full and free as at the time he died upon the cross: at this instant do his bowels yearn over sinners: he invites them all, and importunes them to accept his proffered salvation: and to those who have tasted of his mercy he still continues to be gracious: he keepeth mercy for thousands, when they would cast it utterly away: he does not in anger shut up his tender mercies: he will chastise, but not cast off: he will "hide his face for a little moment; but with everlasting kindness will he have mercy upon us."

Such was the subject-matter of *their* praise: and shall *our* tongues be silent? Have we not incomparably greater cause for thanksgiving than the Jews were even able to conceive? Let the praises of God then be in our lips; and let us unite our hearts and voices in declaring the goodness and mercy of our God.

Were this more the frame of our hearts, surely we should find God more frequently present in our worshipping assemblies; for he would certainly never leave us without "witness that we pleased him."

This brings us to consider,

III. The testimony which God gave them of his approbation—

God had often vouchsafed to appear in a visible manner to his people: he went before them in a cloud through the wilderness, and conducted them in all their journeys: and, when Moses had finished the tabernacle according to the direction given him by God, it pleased God to give him a signal token of his presence and approbation. In Exod. xl. 34, 35. it is said, "Then (when Moses had finished the work) a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle: and Moses was not able to enter into the tent of the congregation, because the cloud abode thereon, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle." Exactly similar to this was the testimony which God now gave of his approbation, both to Solomon and all the assembly: "he came down

down in a cloud, and filled the house with his glory, so that the priests could not stand to minister there any longer."

This cloud was the Shechinah, or symbol of the Divine presence: and its coming down, and filling the place at that time, was a signal manifestation of the Divine favour. This shadowy representation of the Deity was suited to that dispensation, wherein every thing was wrapped up in obscure types and shadows: it was calculated to strike their senses, and impress them with reverence for God; while, at the same time, the effect which it produced upon the priests served to intimate, that, when Christ should come, and the Deity truly appear in the Temple of Christ's body, the priests should cease to minister in their former manner, and the whole of that dispensation should be done away.

It is particularly proper on this occasion to notice the exact time when God was pleased to vouchsafe this remarkable testimony of his approbation. If we look to the text, we shall see that it was not when the sacrifices were offered, nor even when the ark was deposited in its place; but it was when the singers and the players on the musical instruments joined in one grand chorus of praise and thanksgiving: "It came even to pass, *as the trumpeters and singers were as one*, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the Lord, and *when they lift up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music*, and praised the Lord, saying, For He is good, for his mercy endureth for ever; that *then* the house was filled with a cloud." We cannot doubt but that God approved of every part of this grand ceremony: but that which crowned the whole was, the tribute of praise offered by the chorus of vocal and instrumental music. We have before observed, that this, without the heart, would be a vain offering indeed: but, with the heart, no doubt it is pleasing and acceptable to God in the highest degree: it comes as near as possible to the worship of heaven, where, in one grand concert, they strike their golden harps, and sing, "Salvation to God and to the Lamb for ever!"

ever!" In Rev. xiv. 1—3. St. John beheld in a vision the glorious company of heaven; and he says, "I looked; and, lo! a Lamb stood on the Mount Sion, and with him an hundred forty and four thousand, having his Father's name written in their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder: and I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps; and they sung as it were a new song before the throne." Shall not we therefore endeavour to anticipate that blessed employment? shall not we strive to bring down heaven upon earth? shall not we from henceforth lift up our voices unto God, and every one be ambitious to join as in one general chorus? Yes, my Brethren, let me hope that many of you will unite your endeavours: call to mind the goodness of your God; think of his manifold and never-ending mercies; think of Jesus the fountain and foundation of all your blessings; stir up your hearts to gratitude; let not one be silent;—and while we are united in singing the high praises of our God, may God himself come down in the midst of us, and fill the house with his glory! Amen, and Amen!

CCLXXI.

GOD'S ACCEPTANCE OF DAVID'S GOOD DESIRES.

2 Chron. vi. 7, 8. *Now it was in the heart of David my father to build an house for the name of the Lord God of Israel. But the Lord said to David my father, Forasmuch as it was in thine heart to build an house for my name, thou didst well, in that it was in thine heart.*

FROM our general notions of the Deity, we should be ready to imagine, that he would not only permit, but encourage, the execution of every good thought that could come into our minds. But "his ways are not as our ways, nor his thoughts as our thoughts:" he appoints unto men their work according to his sovereign will, and uses what instruments he pleases for the accomplishment of his own designs.

signs. Moses, who had brought the people of Israel out of Egypt and led them through the wilderness, was not permitted to conduct them into Canaan; he must devolve that office on Joshua, and die without seeing the completion of the work he had begun. Thus David had conceived a noble idea of building a temple unto the Lord, and had made preparations for it to a most astonishing extent: yet God suffered him not to execute the work, but ordered him to leave it to Solomon his son. At the dedication of the temple, Solomon brought this fact to the remembrance of the people, partly perhaps with a view to honour the memory of David his father, but principally to display the sovereignty of God who had appointed *him* to that office, and the faithfulness of God in having enabled him to complete the work. But at the same time that he mentions the prohibition given to David his father respecting the execution of his design, he declares God's gracious acceptance of the intention just as much as if it had been carried into effect, since it argued and evinced that state of mind which alone could have rendered the act itself acceptable in the sight of God.

In this incident, as related in our text, we notice,

I. The characteristic marks of true piety—

From the example before us, we see that,

1. Its aims are high—

[David sought to honour and exalt Jehovah's name: and wherever real piety exists, it will inspire us with similar views and sentiments. To act merely with a view to this world, or for the promoting of our own interests, will appear unworthy of a rational and immortal being. We shall "look (that is, *aim*) not at the things which are visible and temporal, but at the things which are invisible and eternal." We shall carry this spirit into all the common acts and offices of life: "whether we eat or drink, or whatever we do, we shall endeavour to do it all to the glory of God." In speaking on this subject, St. Paul uses an expression of peculiar force: he says, that "as Christ had been, so he should continue to be, *magnified* in his body, whether by life or death[a]." Perhaps it may be thought, that such an aim was proper in an Apostle, but would be presumptuous in us: but it is equally proper for all; and indeed is necessary for all: for, "being

[a] Phil. i. 20.

"being not our own, but bought with a price, we should glorify God with our bodies and our spirits, which are his[b]."]

2. Its efforts earnest—

[David not only desired to build the temple, but collected materials for it, and contributed towards it to an incredible amount. Thus is piety always operative, and regards all earthly possessions as talents to be improved for God. The more those talents are multiplied to us, the greater obligation we shall feel to honour God with them: and every service which we are enabled to render him, we shall consider only as a step to further services. If we attained the eminence even of Paul himself, and, like him, had laboured more than all the other Apostles, we should not be satisfied with any thing we had done, whilst any thing yet remained for us to do: we should "forget all that was behind, of the course we had already run, and reach forth unto that which was before, and press toward the mark for the prize of our high-calling in Christ Jesus[c]." Yes; "as many of us as are perfect and upright in the sight of God, will certainly be thus minded[d]."]

3. Its desires are unbounded—

[Had David's means been augmented an hundred-fold, his desire to use them for God would have proportionably increased: his ability would still have been the measure of his exertions. True piety regards, not the opinion of the world, but the will of God: it looks at the precepts, the promises, the examples, set before us in the Scriptures; and makes them the standard of its aims and efforts. The precepts require us to "love and serve God with *all* our heart, and *all* our mind, and *all* our soul, and *all* our strength:" the promises give us reason to hope that we shall be "cleansed from *all* unrighteousness," and "be renewed after *the image of our God* in righteousness and true holiness:" and God proposes himself to us as our pattern, that we should "be holy, *as he is holy*," and "be perfect, even as *our father which is in heaven is perfect*." However short of these things the Christian falls in point of practice, he desires, if it were possible, to fulfil all that is required of him, and to attain "the full measure of the stature of Christ himself[e]." In a word, he realizes in his experience the prayer of Epaphras, and "labours fervently and incessantly to stand perfect and complete in all the will of God[f]."]

Whoever possesses such piety in his heart, shall assuredly be honoured with,

II. God's approbation and acceptance of it—

Without the heart, no services that we can render to the Lord are pleasing to him—

[God

[b] 1 Cor. vi. 19, 20. [c] Phil. iii. 13, 14. [d] ib. ver. 15.
[e] Eph. iv. 13. [f] Col. iv. 12.

[God says to every one of us, "My son, give me thy heart:" and, if we withhold that, he regards nothing else that we can give him: our very prayers and our praises are only an abomination to him[g] — — —]

But, where the heart is, even the smallest services are pleasing in his sight—

[God judges not of our services by their magnitude in the eyes of men, but by the measure of love and zeal with which they are performed. The widow's mite was on this account considered as "*more*" than all the offerings of the rich: in itself, it was nothing; but, as indicating the state of her mind, it was above all price. And it is worthy of observation, that the most encouraging promises in Scripture are given to such expressions of our feelings as most indicate the sincerity of our hearts. A sigh, a groan, a look, a wish, a silent tear stealing down the cheek, are amongst the most acceptable offerings that we can present to God[gg]. And when his Holy Spirit operates most powerfully upon our hearts, it is "with groanings which cannot be uttered[h]." If he looked at the outward services merely, the poor would labour under the greatest disadvantages: but we are assured, that he forms no such partial estimate of men's conduct; but that, "if there be first a willing mind, he accepts us according to what we have, and not according to what we have not[i];" so that, provided our exertions be proportioned to our ability, the poorest and weakest amongst us shall be approved and rewarded equally with those, whose abilities and opportunities have been most enlarged: yea, if through the good providence of God we be incapacitated for any service whatever, yet, if we desire to serve God, he will bear testimony to us before all, saying, "Thou hast done well, in that it was in thine heart to serve me."]

APPLICATION—

That we may obtain such a testimony from the Lord,

1. Let the advancement of the Church be dear unto us—

[There is a temple which we are called to build, and of which the Temple of Solomon was but a type and shadow; I mean, the Church of Christ, which to all eternity shall be "the habitation of God through the Spirit[k]." For the advancement of that, we should long, and pray, and strive; and never cease from our

[g] Matt. xv. 7—9. Isai. i. 11, 13. Amos v. 21—23.
[gg] Ps. lxxix. 11. & xxxviii. 9. & xxxiv. 5. & x. 17. & cxlv. 19. & lvi. 8.
[h] Rom. viii. 23, 26. [i] 2 Cor. viii. 12.
[k] Eph. ii. 20—22. 1 Pet. ii. 4, 5.

our exertions, till God himself "shall bring forth the head-stone, and the whole universe shall shout, Grace, grace unto it[l]!"]

*** If this were a *Mission Sermon*, or for *building a Church*, here would be the proper place to press the subject.

2. Let us, in all that we do, be particularly attentive to our own hearts—

[Many sinister motives are apt to arise, and to pollute our best actions: our liberality is apt to savour of ostentation, and our spiritual affections, of pride and vanity. But God, "to whom all things are naked and open," will judge according to what he sees in the inmost recesses of the heart; approving of the good that was there, though never carried into effect; and disapproving of our latent hypocrisy, by whatever specious appearances it had been concealed from mortal eyes. Only take care that the heart be right with God, and then all will be well with us, both in time and eternity.]

3. Let us be contented with doing what we can for God, though we should not succeed according to our wishes—

[If our labours be crowned with present success, we receive, as it were, a present recompence: but if our labour appear to be in vain, we may expect a suitable recompence hereafter. God will reward us, not according to our success, but according to our labour[m]. The very consciousness of endeavouring to honour God is itself an ample reward for all that we can do. Whether we ourselves reap, or leave others to enter into our labours, we should be equally well pleased to serve our God. Let this thought animate us all in our respective stations; and whether our abilities be more or less, let us all endeavour to obtain this testimony from the Lord, "*He hath done what he could*[n]."]

[l] Zech. iv. 7. [m] 1 Cor. iii. 8. [n] Mark xiv. 8.

CCLXXII.

CONDESCENSION OF GOD IN BECOMING INCARNATE.

2 Chron. vi. 18. *Will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth?*

IT is nothing but a want of reflection, that keeps us from being filled with incessant wonder and astonishment. The things which God has done for us in the works of creation and providence, if duly searched out, would furnish abundant matter for our pro-

profoundest adoration. But the provision which he has made for our redemption exceeds all the bounds of credibility. Even those manifestations of his mercy whereby he shadowed forth the mystery of his incarnation, were so stupendous, that Solomon, who beheld them, could scarcely believe his own eyes. He had erected a temple which was to be a type of Christ's human body. He had just seen God coming down in a cloud to take possession of that temple, and filling it with his glory. He was in the act of dedicating it to God, and of praying that it might be, as it were, an habitation for him: but struck with astonishment at the requests which he was presuming to offer, he pauses, and breaks forth into this hesitating, admiring, adoring exclamation, "But will God—in very deed—dwell—with men—on the earth?" This was an inconceivable act of condescension as it respected his symbolic presence in a temple of stone; but it was infinitely more so, as it respected his *real* presence in a body of flesh. To illustrate this we shall,

1. Contrast the characters of God and man—

We can be at no loss for matter to illustrate this subject, since light and darkness, or Christ and Belial, are not more opposite. But that we may not exceed the limits proper for this part of our discourse, we shall draw the contrast in two particulars only:

1. The majesty of God, and the meanness of man—

[We have no higher ideas of majesty than those which are conveyed under the terms appropriate to royalty. God therefore, in order to suit himself to our feeble apprehensions, adopts those terms in reference to himself. He assumes the *title* of a king; he is "King of kings, and Lord of lords[a]." He has moreover all the *ensigns of royalty;* "heaven is his throne, and earth his footstool[b]." Unnumbered hosts of angels are his *retinue;* "thousands of thousands minister unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stand before him[c]." Instead of the *equipage* of an earthly monarch, he "maketh the clouds his chariot, and rideth on the heavens as upon a horse[d]." So great is his majesty, that "all the nations of the earth are before him only "as the drop of

[a] Rev. xvii. 14.
[b] Isai. lxvi. 1.
[c] Dan. vii. 10.
[d] Ps. civ. 3. & lxviii. 4.

of a bucket, or as the small dust upon the balance;" yea "they are less than nothing and vanity[e]." And so "terrible is his majesty," that, "if he touch the mountains, they smoke; and, if he but look upon the earth, it trembles[f]." But in attempting to speak of his majesty, we only "darken counsel by words without knowledge." Suffice it therefore to add, that "the heaven of heavens cannot contain him[g];" and that "his greatness is unsearchable[h]."

But what is man? an atom insect of an atom world. If we compare him with the globe on which we stand, he is a mere worm: but if we compare him with the visible creation; and still more, if we view the universe with the eye of a philosopher, if we compute the distances of the fixed stars, if we suppose that multitudes of them are, like our sun, the centre of different and independent systems; if we then compare him with these, what an insignificant Being will he appear! The smallest grain of sand is not so diminutive in comparison of the whole terrestrial globe, as the whole human race would be when compared with the other works of God's hands. But unworthy as man is of God's notice in this view, he has rendered himself incomparably more unworthy by the commission of sin. By this he is become, not merely worthless, but odious and abominable. In this respect the whole human race are involved in one common lot: and so contemptible are they in his eyes, that there is scarce an animal among the brute creation to whom he does not liken them, and that too in reference to their most hateful qualities: from whence we may understand, that man is a compound of every thing that is noxious and hateful.

And can we conceive, that so great and glorious a Being as God should ever deign to notice man; and not only to notice him, but to dwell with him?]

2. The purity of God, and the sinfulness of man—

[Holiness is that attribute of the Deity which is most eminently glorified by the heavenly choir: they cry day and night, saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts[i]." On earth too this perfection is peculiarly admired by the saints, who "give thanks at the remembrance of his holiness[k]." Such was God's abhorrence of iniquity, that he cast the fallen angels out of heaven. Nor can he behold sin in man, without feeling the utmost indignation against it[l]. But why do we mention these things? Such is the holiness of God, that "he chargeth even his angels with folly[m];" and "the very heavens are not clean in his sight[n]."

As for man, he is, unhappily, a perfect contrast to God in these respects.

[e] Isai. xl. 15, 17.
[f] Ps. civ. 32.
[g] ver. 18.
[h] Ps. cxlv. 3.
[i] Isai. vi. 3.
[k] Ps. xxx. 4.
[l] Hab. i. 13.
[m] Job iv. 18.
[n] Job xv. 15.

respects. He is polluted in *every member of his body*, and in *every faculty of his soul*. The inspired writers seem to have laboured, as it were, to mark the extreme depravity of man, by specifying that his members are altogether instruments of unrighteousness[m]: his "*eyes* are full of adultery[o]," and his "*ears* deaf as an adder[p];" his "*mouth* and *lips* full of cursing and bitterness[q];" his "*tongue* is a world of iniquity, set on fire of hell[r]," and "his *throat* an open sepulchre[s];" "*both* his *hands* are employed to work iniquity[t];" his "*feet* are swift to shed blood[u];" and, to complete the whole, "his *inward parts* are very wickedness[x]." His *soul* is, if possible, yet more depraved: his *understanding* is blinded, so that it "puts evil for good, and darkness for light[y]." His *will* is rebellious, so that it cannot bow to the commands of God[z]. His *affections* are earthly and sensual. His *memory* is retentive of what is evil, while it lets slip every good admonition or advice. His *conscience* is partial, excusing where it should condemn; and, in too many, it is "seared as with a hot iron."

Contrast this character with that of God; and then say, whether it be possible for God to dwell with man.]

Having thus prepared the way, we will,

II. Give an answer to the question proposed in the text—

Our answer is short: He not only *will* dwell with man on the earth; but he *has* done it. He has dwelt with man,

1. Symbolically—

[When Israel came out of Egypt, God went before them in all their way, and guided them by a pillar and a cloud: and even to the time of the Babylonish captivity, did he continue by that symbol of his presence to dwell in the midst of his people. This alone were sufficient to shew the condescension and grace of God; and to prove that he will make his abode with those who are the objects of his special favour.]

2. Personally—

[Wonderful as it may appear, God has taken upon him our nature and dwelt amongst us. In the fulness of time, he appeared on earth; and, though formed, without the intervention of man, by the agency of the Holy Ghost, he came into the world like other infants, passed through the helpless years of childhood, wrought at a low trade till the age of thirty; and then continued nearly four years longer in the exercise of his Ministerial office, as

[m] Rom. vi. 13.
[o] 2 Pet. ii. 14.
[p] Ps. lviii. 4.
[q] Rom. iii. 14.
[r] Jam. iii. 6.
[s] Rom. iii. 13.
[t] Mic. vii. 3.
[u] Rom. iii. 15.
[x] Ps. v. 9.
[y] 2 Cor. iv. 4. Isai. v. 20.
[z] Rom. viii. 7.

as the instructor of men, and the Saviour of the world. While he was despised and rejected of men, and accounted a worm and no man, he was "God over all blessed for evermore:" "in him dwelt all the fulness of the Godhead bodily[a]." It was in order to prepare the world for this, that he so often appeared to the Patriarchal saints, and that he for so many centuries abode in the tabernacle and the temple. By manifesting himself in our flesh, he has clearly shewn, that "as his majesty is, so is his mercy."]

3. Mystically—

[There is yet another temple in which God delights to dwell, even in the broken and contrite heart[b]. He has repeatedly promised, that he will thus distinguish those who seek him in spirit and in truth. "He will come to them, and make his abode with them[c]." "He will dwell in their hearts by faith[d]." "He will manifest himself unto them as he does not unto the world[e]." It was in this way that he enabled all the primitive Christians to shine as lights in a dark world, and to maintain their stedfastness in the midst of the most cruel persecutions. It is in the same way that he still upholds and sanctifies his chosen people: "Such honour have all his Saints."]

APPLICATION—

Has God in very deed dwelt with man on the earth? Then let us,

1. Marvel at our own ingratitude—

[Who would imagine that God should have become a man for us, and offer moreover to dwell in our hearts, and that we should be so unmindful of him? Is it a light thing that he has done; to assume our nature, when he passed by the fallen angels; to assume it in its fallen debased state, as far as he could consistently with his own unspotted holiness; to assume it for the express purpose of bearing our sins and expiating them by his own death? Is it a light thing that he offers to do, when he begs us to open our hearts to him, that he may make them his habitation? Yet what are the returns we make him? We do indeed commemorate both his incarnation, and the descent of the Holy Spirit: but how? with holy feasting, and with spiritual joy? Do we not rather act, as if he came to liberate us from all restraints, and to give us a license to forget him, and to abandon ourselves to carnal pleasure? Let us only reflect on the manner in which these holy seasons have been spent by all around us, and how little our own spirit and conduct have accorded with the mercies vouchsafed unto us, and we shall see reason to blush and be confounded, yea rather, to weep in dust and ashes.]

2. Seek

[a] Col. ii. 9. [b] Isai. lvii. 15. [c] John xiv. 23.
[d] Eph. iii. 17. [e] John xiv. 22.

2. Seek to dwell with him in heaven—

[For what purpose has God revealed himself to us in this diversified and astonishing manner? Has it not been to display the exceeding riches of his grace, and to encourage our application to him for an interest in his favour? Yes; he would not that we should "dwell with everlasting burnings;" but rather that we should be made partakers of his glory. It was for this end that he became incarnate, and died upon the cross: it is for this end that he yet daily strives with us by his Spirit. In very deed he dwelt with man on earth, that we might dwell with God in heaven. Let us then make a suitable improvement of his unbounded mercy; and secure the exaltation, which he, by his own humiliation, has prepared for us.]

CCLXXIII.

HUMILIATION THE MEANS OF DELIVERANCE.

2 Chron. xii. 7. *And when the Lord saw that they humbled themselves, the word of the Lord came to Shemaiah, saying, They have humbled themselves, therefore I will not destroy them.*

REPENTANCE is so plain and acknowledged a duty, that it is never unseasonable to call men to the performance of it: whilst, on the other hand, so great are our encouragements to it, that we rather account it a privilege than a duty. The instances wherein God has recorded his condescension to penitents of old time, are almost numberless: the one before us, even if there were no other, would of itself be sufficient to encourage all, whether nations or individuals, to abase themselves before him, and to seek his favour with an assurance that they should not seek it in vain.

For the space of three years Rehoboam continued to walk in the ways of David and of Solomon[a]. But having, as he thought, strengthened himself against all assault from foreign enemies, "he forsook the law of the Lord, as did all Israel together with him[b]." For this great defection God stirred up Shishak king of Egypt to come forth against him with a large army. Shishak doubtless was of himself

[a] Ch. xi. 17. [b] ver. 1.

self willing enough to invade a country which offered the prospect of such abundant spoil as Jerusalem did at that time: but, though unconscious of any foreign agency, he was only an instrument in God's hands, sent forth to punish the transgressions of revolted Israel[c]. Success attended the invading army in all their movements; the fenced cities all successively fell into their hands; and at last Jerusalem itself became their prey. In less than five short years was all the wealth which David and Solomon had treasured up in the temple and in the king's house, swept away, and delivered over as a spoil to a victorious enemy. And now would Jerusalem itself also have been utterly destroyed, if the arm of justice had not been arrested by the penitential cries of Rehoboam and his nobles. God had sent a prophet to declare to them the grounds and reasons of the judgments that were now inflicted on them: and they, seeing that all other hope had failed them, betook themselves to repentance. To this God had respect, as our text informs us; and, on seeing their repentance, he sent the same prophet to assure them, that he would suspend his uplifted arm, and forbear to execute upon them his judgments according to the full measure of their deserts.

Now from the message which was sent them from the Lord we may properly observe,

I. That sin will surely bring the judgments of God upon us—

[It matters not by whom sin is committed; for all are equally amenable to the laws of God, and must stand on an equal footing at the bar of judgment. Kings and princes are in this respect on a level with the lowest of mankind: for "with God is no respect of persons."

Nor must we imagine that those sins only which are of greater enormity in our eyes will be noticed by God: for he notices the violations of the first table, as well as of the second; and those of defect as well as those of actual transgression. The sum of the two tables is, that "we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength; and our neighbour as ourselves:" and it will be to little purpose, that we have not

[c] ver. 2.

not bowed down to strange gods, if we have withheld from Jehovah the entire devotion of our souls; or that we have not injured our neighbour by the open crimes of adultery and murder, if we have withheld from him those holy exercises of brotherly affection which God has made his due. Sins of omission must be accounted for, as well as those of commission: and not one escapes the notice of the heart-searching God.

Our iniquities, because committed long ago, may be forgotten by us: but not one of them is forgotten by God: they are all recorded in the book of his remembrance: and the precise measure of "wrath" that is due to each "is treasured up," against the day that the vials of God's wrath shall be poured out upon the whole world. Every sin leaves a stain behind it: and as the hunted stag, though far removed from the sight or hearing of his pursuers, is traced by them till he is overtaken and destroyed, so will the sinner be by the judgments of the Most High; according as it is said, "Evil shall *hunt* the wicked man, to overthrow him." Yes, to every sinner under heaven must it be said, "Be sure your sin will find you out."]

Nor is there any possibility of escape, but by repentance; since God has ordained,

II. That sin, in order to its being forgiven, must be repented of—

["God has commanded all men every where to repent:" and has declared, that, "except we repent, we must all perish."

But let it not be thought that repentance is a mere light and transient emotion: no indeed: repentance is a far different thing from what is generally supposed. It must be general, not relating to some few particular acts, but to the state and habit of our souls throughout our whole lives. It must also be deep, like that of the publican, leading us to smite on our breasts with much contrition, and to cry for mercy as the most unworthy of mankind. One thing in particular we notice in Rehoboam and the princes; they acknowledged, that "God was righteous" in all that he had brought upon them[d]. And till we also are brought ingenuously and from our inmost souls to acknowledge, that he may justly enter into judgment with us, and consign our souls over to everlasting perdition, we are not truly penitent: we see not our own demerit: we virtually deny God's right to punish us: we are proud, unhumbled, unsubdued.

Our penitence must also lead us to cast ourselves altogether upon God's promised mercy in Christ Jesus. This it is which constitutes the difference between that "repentance which is unto salvation," and which is "never to be repented of," and that repentance which will leave us short of salvation, and leave room

[d] ver. 6.

room for everlasting penitence in the world to come. If our hope terminate on any thing short of the blood and righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ, we have not yet learned the extent of our fall, or the impossibility of being saved by any name but his.]

It is, however, no little consolation to know,

III. That sin, truly repented of, shall assuredly be forgiven—

[How delightful the evidence of this in the passage before us! God sends his servant to announce to his penitent people his compassion towards them, and his readiness to forgive; expressly grounding his forgiveness on the penitence which they had evinced. And where shall we find any instance of penitence despised, or of judgments inflicted on one who with sincerity of heart implored mercy at God's hands? We will take an instance of one whose crimes perhaps exceeded those of any other individual from the foundation of the world,—the idolatrous, and murderous Manasseh. He, like Rehoboam and his courtiers, thought not of repentance, till he was reduced, as it were, to the lowest ebb of misery: but even then his cry was heard; and his supplication entered into the ears of the Lord of Hosts[e]. So, if we be truly penitent, whatever may have been the extent of our iniquity, it shall be forgiven. "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon[f]." Only let us "repent and turn ourselves from all our transgressions, and then iniquity shall not be our ruin[g]." Though "our sins have been many, they shall be forgiven[h];" and "where sin has abounded, the grace of our God shall much more abound[i]."]

And now permit me to institute a most important INQUIRY—

[Respecting Rehoboam and the princes, it is said, "God saw that they humbled themselves:" and of this God testified, saying, "They *have* humbled themselves." Now then I ask, Can he bear the same testimony respecting you? Has he seen you weeping in secret on account of your multiplied iniquities? Can he say of you as he does of Ephraim, "Surely I have heard Ephraim bemoaning himself;" and can he, as he did in Ephraim's case, rehearse the very language of your lips and hearts, and attest your every motion, whether of body or mind, as indicating the depth and sincerity of your repentance[k]? — — — Call to mind the time, the place, the occasion — — — Say whether it

[e] 2 Chron. xxxiii. 11—13.
[f] Isai. lv. 7.
[g] Ezek. xviii. 30.
[h] Luke vii. 47.
[i] Rom. v. 20.
[k] Jer. xxxi. 18, 19.

it arose only out of some particular circumstances, or whether it be the stated habit of your mind? Were this indeed the general frame of your souls, we would congratulate you, assured that God has already said concerning you, "Is not Ephraim my dear son? Is he not a pleasant child? for since I spake against him, I do earnestly remember him still: therefore my bowels are troubled for him; I will surely have mercy upon him, saith the Lord[l]." There can be no doubt respecting any "one who thus sows in tears, that he shall soon reap in joy[m]."

But respecting too many of you, must not the testimony of God be the very reverse of this? Must not the heart-searching God say respecting the generality,—"I have seen in them no repentance at all? I have seen them agitated times without number on account of earthly things: I have seen them angry, when offended; and grieved, when they have suffered loss: but I have never seen them angry at themselves for offending me, nor bemoaning, as they should have done, the loss of their own souls. If you were to form your estimate from what has been seen in them, you must conclude, that sin is no great evil; that repentance on account of it is of no urgent necessity; and that acceptance with me is not worth the trouble of it"—? Must he not further testify respecting some, "I have seen their parents, yea, and their Minister too, weeping over them; but have never seen them weeping for themselves"—?

Now, Brethren, it is to little purpose for you to say, "I have repented," unless "your sorrow has been of a godly sort:" for you will not be judged by what you are pleased to call repentance, but by the standard of God's blessed word: it is by that that God forms his estimate of you now; and by that will you be judged in the last day. "Judge yourselves therefore now, that ye may not be judged of the Lord." If it were only such a destruction as impended over Jerusalem, that were about to come upon you, methinks I would be content to let you "sleep on and take your rest:" but, when I reflect that it is an "everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power," I tremble at the thought of your exposure to it, and of its being the doom to which you are so soon to be consigned.

Begin then this necessary work, ere it be too late——— Consider God as now calling you to it by me, as he called his people of old by the prophet Shemaiah[n]——— and never cease to abase yourselves before him, till he shall have said concerning you, "I have seen his ways, and will heal him, and will restore comfort to him and to his mourners[o]:" for you may be assured, that,

[l] Jer. xxxi. 20. [m] Ps. cxxvi. 5.

[n] If this be a subject for a *Fast-Day* on account of ill success in war, or any other calamity, a parallel may here be drawn between that and the afflictions specified in the context.

[o] Isai. lvii. 18.

that, if now you "are afflicted, and mourn, and weep; if your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into heaviness, so that you humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, he will lift you up in due time[p]:" he will say, "Deliver him from going down into the pit; for I have found and accepted a ransom for him[q]."]

[p] Jam. iv. 9, 10. [q] Job xxxiii. 27, 28.

CCLXXIV.

ABIJAH'S REMONSTRANCE WITH JEROBOAM.*

2 Chron. xiii. 12. *Behold, God himself is with us for our Captain, and his priests with sounding trumpets to cry alarm against you. O children of Israel, fight ye not against the Lord God of your fathers; for ye shall not prosper.*

GOOD advice should be attended to, by whomsoever it may be given. Our blessed Lord particularly inculcated this on his Disciples, commanding them to do whatever those who sat in Moses' chair required of them, without regarding the moral character of the persons themselves, or refusing compliance with what was good, because it was not exemplified in the conduct of their instructors. The words before us were not spoken by a good man; for Abijah was on the whole a wicked king[a]: but they contain very sound instruction, and have a semblance even of piety itself. The whole address indeed was well fitted for the occasion, though it certainly savours much of that partiality, which is found in almost all who plead their own cause. There is undoubtedly a good deal of false colouring in what he speaks to the disparagement of his enemies, though there is ground for his assertions, if they had been more carefully expressed and more duly qualified. Notwithstanding Abijah had invaded Jeroboam's country, in order to make that, rather than his own country, the seat of war, we think it probable that Jeroboam was the aggressor; because the address of Abijah was altogether of a pacific nature. It

* For a *Fast-Day* in War.

[a] 1 Kin. xv. 3.

It seems from the words of our text that he laboured hard to prevent the effusion of blood: and if his adversary had been like-minded with himself, the dispute might perhaps have been amicably adjusted.

We shall consider the words of our text,

I. In reference to the contest then pending between Judah and Israel—

Abijah's address was certainly striking and judicious—

[Abijah contrasts the usurpation and idolatry of Jeroboam with the legitimate claims of his own family, and their continued adherence to the God of their fathers[b] ——— and doubtless these were just grounds for hope, that God would espouse his cause: for though it may please God for a season to let the ungodly triumph over his people, yet we believe, that, as a righteous Governor, he will ultimately favour the cause of righteousness and truth.

Well did the Israelites know, that there could be no effectual resistance to the Lord of Hosts, especially when those who were under his command were observant of the laws appointed for them. Hence, when Abijah told his adversaries, that he was come forth in dependence on God's aid, and in a strict observance of his commands[c], they had reason to tremble for themselves, and to refrain from prosecuting the contest any farther. True indeed, a hypocrite may make all these pretensions, even as Rabshakeh did in his address to Hezekiah's servants[d]: but where the dependence is real, and the obedience true, a successful issue may justly be expected.]

The event justified his expectations—

[Whilst Abijah was endeavouring to avert the conflict, Jeroboam sought by stratagem to overwhelm him and all his followers. He placed in ambush a considerable portion of his army, and attacked Abijah both in front and rear. But Abijah "cried unto the Lord; and the priests sounded with their trumpets; and the men of Judah gave a shout," expressive of their confidence in God: and immediately the hosts of Israel turned their backs; and, though they were twice as numerous as their enemies, no less than five hundred thousand of them fell down slain before the victorious hosts of Judah. Never was there such a slaughter in one single battle, either before or since: and the event of that day fully proves, that they who fight for God have nothing to fear; nor they who fight against him, to hope[e] ———]

Taking

[b] ver. 4—11.

[c] Numb. x. 9. This passage reflects much light on the text.

[d] Isai. xxxvi. 10. [e] Ezek. xxi. 14. with Rom. viii. 31.

Taking the text in somewhat of an accommodated sense, we will proceed to consider it,

II. In reference to the contest now pending between God and us—

There is a contest now existing between God and sinners—

[By every sin that men commit, they do indeed "fight against God"——— What shall we say of those who cast off their allegiance to the God of Israel; who bow down to idols of their own creation; who disregard the word and ordinances of their God; and who seek only to wound and to destroy those who warn them of their guilt and danger? Are not they avowed enemies to God? They are: their own reason may tell them so: the Scriptures universally declare it: justify themselves as they may, their excuses are all vain; and they only deceive their own souls———]

"Suffer ye then the word of exhortation"[f]—

["O children of Israel, fight ye not against the Lord God of your fathers!" We are appointed of God to "blow the trumpet of alarm against you;" and we must blow it, at the peril of our own souls: we must "lift up our voice as a trumpet, and shew you both your sin" and danger[f]. It is against God, even "the Captain of our salvation" himself, that you are fighting: it is his majesty that you oppose, his law you trample on, his mercy you despise, and his salvation you reject———O think with yourselves, Can you prosper? "Did ever any harden themselves against him and prosper[g]?" No indeed; "it is in vain to kick against the pricks:" "though hand join in hand, the wicked shall not go unpunished[h]."]

APPLICATION—

1. From the former view of this subject, we may learn how to obtain the blessing of God upon our arms—

[It is not by confidence in an arm of flesh that we can hope to prevail, but by an humble trust in God. It is said, "The children of Israel prevailed, *because they relied upon the Lord God of their fathers*[i]." Notwithstanding the numbers and the stratagems of their enemies, they prevailed, because God himself fought for them. Let us then by prayer and supplication call God to our aid, and rest assured that he will interpose for us in the hour of necessity.

Whilst

[f] Isai. lviii. 1. [g] Job ix. 4. [h] Prov. xi. 21. [i] ver. 18.

Whilst indeed we trust in him for success, we must use every effort for the attainment of peace: but if our adversary will not listen to reasonable terms, then may we go forth with confidence against him, knowing that "with God it is alike easy to save by many or by few."]

2. From the latter view of this subject we may learn how to escape the destruction to which we are exposed—

[Our God "has made ready his glittering spear;" and he has already said, "Ah, I will ease me of mine adversaries, and avenge me of mine enemies[k]." What then shall we do? Shall we continue the contest? What would this be, but to "set briers and thorns in battle against the devouring fire, which would go through them, and burn them up together[l]?" No: let us throw down our weapons of rebellion against him, and cast ourselves on the multitude of his tender mercies: let us go, like Benhadad, "with ropes round our necks, and sackcloth on our loins," and confess our desert of his heavier judgments. Then will he "turn from his fierce anger," and be reconciled towards us: yea, "he will be merciful to our transgressions, and our sins and iniquities will he remember no more."]

[k] Isai. i. 24. [l] Isai. xxvii. 4.

CCLXXV.

ASA'S COVENANT WITH GOD.*

2 Chron. xv. 12—15. *And they entered into a covenant to seek the Lord God of their fathers with all their heart, and with all their soul; that whosoever would not seek the Lord God of Israel should be put to death, whether small or great, whether man or woman. And they sware unto the Lord with a loud voice, and with shouting, and with trumpets, and with cornets. And all Judah rejoiced at the oath; for they had sworn with all their heart, and sought him with their whole desire: and he was found of them: and the Lord gave them rest round about.*

FEW persons have any just idea of the use and efficacy of Ministerial exertions, when accompanied with power from on high. In the context, we see one man, a prophet of the Lord, standing up in Jehovah's name, and by one single address turning a whole nation to the Lord their God. Doubtless the prophet

prophet Oded[a] had a peculiar commission, and was honoured with a far greater measure of success than any Minister in this day is authorised to expect: nevertheless every servant of the Lord, to whomsoever he may be sent, whether to kings or subjects, should deliver his message with fidelity; and in so doing, may expect that God will render his word effectual for great and extensive good. In the hope that our message shall not be altogether in vain, we come to you now in Jehovah's name, and call upon you to covenant with him as Asa and his subjects did: and, that we may prevail with you to comply with our injunctions, we will distinctly consider,

I. What covenant they made—

Here we shall separately notice,

1. The covenant itself—

[This related to nothing which they were not previously bound to fulfil. To "seek the Lord God of their fathers" was their duty: the law of Moses, yea, the law of nature, bound them to it: and reason, no less than revelation, told them, not only that they should seek after God, but that they should seek him with their whole hearts.]

2. The manner in which they made it—

[Their zeal was very remarkable; yet was it precisely what the occasion called for. That they should all solemnly *swear* to this covenant, and devote to death every soul that should refuse to concur in it, seems an instance of unparalleled harshness and intolerance; yet were both the oath which they took[b], and the proscription which they agreed to[c], expressly required in the law of Moses: if a husband or a wife were to propose a departure from God, it was the duty of the party who was so tempted to give information to the magistrate, and, on conviction of the offender, to take the lead in executing the sentence of death upon him.]

But it will be asked, Would you propose this as a pattern for *us*? We answer, Yes: we would propose it as a pattern, both in the *matter* and the *manner* of it:—

1. In

[a] In ver. 1. he is called "Azariah the son of Oded:" and we apprehend that when, in ver. 8, he is called "Oded," the son of Oded is meant; this being a common abbreviation in the Scriptures. But in a popular discourse it is not necessary to notice this.

[b] Deut. xxix. 10—15. [c] Deut. xvii. 2—5.

1. In the matter of it—

[Let us covenant "to seek the Lord God of our fathers with our whole heart, and with our whole soul." To seek him thus is our duty, independently of any covenant: it is due to God as our Creator; it is due to him also as our Redeemer. Did our God come down from heaven to seek *us;* and shall not we seek *him?* Did he give up himself to the accursed death of the cross for us; and shall we content ourselves with offering him a divided heart? What is the thing that deserves to be put in competition with him? What has done so much for us, or what can? Have the vanities of this world, "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life," any pretension to be his rivals? O let a sense of his unbounded love and mercy lead us to consecrate ourselves altogether to his service! If the Jews, on account of their deliverance from Egyptian bondage by the exertions of Omnipotence, were bound to seek and serve God with their whole hearts, much more are we, who have been redeemed from sin and Satan, death and hell, by the blood of God's co-equal, co-eternal Son.]

2. In the manner of it—

[If it be thought that we are not called to *swear,* we answer, that we all have sworn already in our baptism; and have renewed our oath when we were confirmed: and, as often as we have attended at the table of the Lord, we have again repeated our oath to renounce the devil and all his works, and to serve the Lord Jesus Christ as our only Lord[d]:

With respect to the *proscription,* we acknowledge that we are not at this time to enforce Christianity by an appeal to the Civil power: and that to inflict the penalty of death on any persons on account of their neglect of Christ, would be to oppose the plainest dictates of his religion: but yet we may, and *must,* declare, that the judgments of God shall overtake all who either reject him altogether, or seek him with a divided heart: yea, the sentence of eternal misery denounced against them in the Scriptures must receive our most unqualified approbation: we must say with St. Paul, "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema, Maran-atha[e];" that is, let him be accursed; and God will surely come ere long to inflict that curse upon him. Thus, notwithstanding the abrogation of penalties to be inflicted by the Civil arm, under the Christian dispensation, we do in fact proceed even further than the Jews did in the covenant before us: for the judgments denounced by them related to *overt acts* only, whereas ours relate to *the heart:* and the penalties inflicted by

[d] The term *Sacramentum* was used to signify the *oath* by which the Roman soldiers engaged never to desert the General under whom they fought.

[e] 1 Cor. xvi. 22.

by them extended only to *the body*, whereas ours relate to *the soul*; and that too of every creature to whom the Gospel is sent, "whether small or great, whether man or woman."

If it be thought that such covenants are needless, we reply, that they are of the greatest possible utility, if solemnly entered into in our secret chamber before God: for, they contain a solemn recognition of our duty, and a deliberate vindication of God's justice in punishing all who will not seek him in his appointed way: they moreover tend exceedingly to impress our own minds with a sense of the heinousness of departing from God, and to fortify us against all the temptations to which at any time we may be exposed: and it is owing to the low state of religious attainments amongst us, that such covenants are so rarely made.

As to the idea of legality, it is no better than an excuse for our own sloth and lukewarmness. For, nothing can be more suited to the spirit of the Gospel than such covenant-transactions are; they are a strict compliance with the Apostle's exhortation "to yield our bodies unto God a living sacrifice, holy, and acceptable unto God, as our reasonable service[f]."]

That we may be stirred up to enter into this covenant, let us contemplate,

II. The benefits resulting from it—

For the discovery of these, we need go no further than the passage before us.

In the very act, [they were filled with great and exalted joy; "they sware, with a loud voice, and with shouting, and with trumpets, and with cornets; yea, all Israel rejoiced at the oath." This mode of testifying their joy was suited to the dispensation under which they lived. The joy which Christianity inspires is of a more refined nature; it is less tumultuous, but more spiritual, and more abiding: and we will venture to appeal to all who have ever solemnly devoted themselves to God in their secret chamber, embracing the Lord Jesus Christ as their only Lord and Saviour, and surrendering up themselves to him as his redeemed people, whether they did not find in that transaction a peace and a joy which nothing else in the whole universe could impart? Do they not at this moment look back to such seasons as the happiest periods of their lives?———We have no fear of contradiction upon this point: we are well assured, that "all who sow in tears do reap in joy[g];" and, for the most part, "the reaper treads upon the

[f] Rom. xii. 1.

[g] Compare Ps. cxxvi. 5, 6. with Jer. xxix. 12, 13.

the very heels of the sower[gg],” so speedily do they enjoy the reward of their labours.]

After the act was performed, [God gave them undoubted testimonies of his acceptance. *How* he manifested it to them on this occasion, we know not: there were a great variety of ways in which he was wont to give his people an evidence of his approbation: at one time, by a lamp passing between the divided pieces of the sacrifice[h]; at another, by a special messenger from heaven[i]; at another, by a voice from heaven[k]; and frequently by sending fire from heaven to consume their sacrifice[l]. But whatever means he used, we are well assured, that he left them no room to doubt of his approbation of the act they had performed; for we are told, “He was found of them.” And will he not be found of us also? and has he not still many ways of manifesting himself to us? Yes; by the secret operation of his Spirit he will reveal himself to our souls, and shed abroad his love in our hearts, and “say unto our souls, I am thy salvation.”]

For a long period afterwards, [there was peace to the land; for “God gave them rest round about.” By comparing different dates in this chapter, we find that the land had rest twenty years[m]. It is true, in another part of the inspired volume, we are told, that “there was war between Asa and Baasha all their days[n]:” but this, for the space mentioned in our text, was only in small contentions or skirmishes on the borders: there was no serious assault upon him from any quarter. This exhibits in a most striking point of view the *rest* which God will give to his believing and obedient people. Our spiritual enemies will not be so put down as to leave us no occasion for vigilance: their enmity will remain the same as ever; and there will still be occasional skirmishes on the borders[o]: but they shall not so come against us as to overwhelm us, or even to destroy our happiness: we shall “know in whom we have believed;” and feel safety in his protection. “Weapons may be formed against us; but they shall not prosper:” and “men may fight against us; but they shall not prevail against us.” It is surprising to what an extent some are delivered from painful conflicts for a considerable time after they have devoted themselves in a solemn covenant to the Lord: their very lusts which once led them captive seem almost to be slain, and “Satan himself to be bruised under their feet.” True it is, that this will not always continue; but the more frequently and cordially we devote ourselves to God, the more abundantly will he fill us with grace and peace,

[gg] Amos ix. 13. [h] Gen. xv. 10, 17. [i] Dan. ix. 21.
[k] John xii. 28, 29. [l] Lev. ix. 24. [m] ver. 10. with ver. 19.
[n] 1 Kin. xv. 16. [o] Gal. v. 17.

peace, and give us a foretaste of that rest which remaineth for us in a better world.]

We shall conclude with two PROPOSALS, in reference to the covenant we have been considering; and we shall make them to two distinct classes:

1. To those who think such an entire devotion of themselves to God unnecessary—

[If God do not require this service at our hands, we need not render it to him: and, if we need not render it to him, we may resolve, and even covenant to withhold it from him. We propose then to those who think there is no necessity to seek after God with their whole hearts, *Let us make a covenant together, that we never will seek him thus: let us confirm it with an oath; and let us swear aloud that heaven and earth may hear. Let us go further still, and covenant to prevent every one to the utmost of our power from seeking him in this way:* let us hate, and revile, and persecute them, and, by every means that the law of the land will admit of, let us deter them from such unnecessary, fanatical, and injurious proceedings. The law will not suffer us to put them to death; but let us at least shew, that we would do it if we dared; and by the whole of our conduct towards them let us say, "Away with such fellows from the earth, for it is not fit that they should live!" Or, if any of you think that we ought to leave others at liberty, then we will wave this part of our proposal, and only covenant that we will never seek after God ourselves. Now then let us begin: let us address ourselves to the sacred Majesty of heaven: let us tell him that he has no such claim upon us as he pretends to in his word, and that we are determined never to render him the service he requires.———What! Do you hold back? Do you shudder at the proposal? Do you tremble at the thought of entering into such a covenant? Yes; methinks, there is not one person present that is bold enough to give it his sanction: yet there are many who act agreeably to the tenor of that covenant; many who seek God in a mere formal way, or at best with a divided heart. Know then, all ye, so violate your duties to your God, that you stand condemned in your own consciences; and, "if your own hearts condemn you, God is greater than your hearts," and will condemn you also. Attend then with becoming reverence to the proposal which we next make,]

2. To those who desire to approve themselves to God in the way that he requires—

[The making of covenants in our own strength is in no respect advisable: but in humble dependence on the grace of Christ we *may* make them, and *ought to* make them. We read of the

Christians in Macedonia, that, previous to serving of God with their *property*, "they gave *their ownselves* to the Lord[r]." And this is what the prophet Jeremiah foretells as characterizing the godly under the Christian dispensation; "Come, let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant, that shall not be forgotten[s]." Now then let us do it: let us all be of one heart and one mind in this particular[t]: let us look up to God for his grace, that we may be enabled to keep the vow which we are about to make: and may "God be found of us," whilst we are thus seeking him; and "give us rest" in our souls, even that rest which our blessed Lord has promised unto all that come to him in truth[u]!

O thou gracious and ever-blessed God, "who hast formed us for thyself," and hast moreover redeemed us by the blood of thine only dear Son, thine we are by every tie. We are conscious that "we are not our own; and that, having been bought with a price, we are bound to glorify thee with our bodies and our spirits, which are thine." We desire then now to consecrate ourselves to thee; and engage, as in thine immediate presence, "no longer to live unto ourselves, but unto Him that died for us and rose again." May we never forget this vow, or act for a moment inconsistent with it! We avouch thee this day to be our God; and we give up ourselves to thee as thy people: and we desire, that "thou wouldest sanctify us wholly; and that our whole spirit, and soul, and body, may be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ[x]."]

[r] 2 Cor. viii. 5. [s] Jer. l. 4, 5.
[t] Here the persons *confirmed* might be particularly addressed.
[u] Matt. xi. 28, 29. [x] 1 Thess. v. 23.

CCLXXVI.

GOD'S REGARD FOR HIS PEOPLE.

2 Chron. xvi. 9. *The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him.*

IN estimating the characters of men, God looks not so much at their actions as at their motives and principles. It is by them that the *quality* of our actions must be determined: for though no motives, however good, can sanctify a bad action, no action however good can be acceptable to God, if its motive and principle be not good. There were, it is true, several things which were blame-worthy in the conduct

conduct of Asa, which was here reproved. He ought not to have made a league at all, we apprehend, with a heathen prince; but certainly not to have induced him to violate the league which he had already made with Israel. But that which rendered his conduct so displeasing to God, was, the distrust from which it sprang. He had not long before been delivered by God from far greater danger; and yet now, instead of applying to God for help again, he placed his dependence on an arm of flesh. In the reproof administered to him on this occasion, the general providence of God, and his tender care of all who trust in him, is strongly asserted: and it is a subject well worthy of the most attentive consideration.

Let us consider,

I. When the heart may be said to be "perfect towards God"—

As for *absolute* perfection in this world, it exists only in the deluded imaginations of some visionary enthusiasts. Nevertheless there is a perfection to which we should aspire, and which we may all attain, which consists in integrity, where "the heart is right with God." This may be said to be the case,

1. When our trust in God is entire—

[The heart of an unconverted man has no disposition to trust in God; nor indeed has he any just ground for trust in him, since God is his enemy. But after a man has been awakened to a sense of his sins, and has sought for mercy through the Lord Jesus Christ, and has even some comfortable evidence that he has obtained mercy, yet he finds it exceeding difficult to repose his confidence in God, to the extent that the Scripture warrants him to do so. He cannot believe that God is so attentive to his concerns, so ready to administer to his wants, and so all-sufficient for his necessities, as he is represented to be in the holy Scriptures. In proportion as he grows in the knowledge of God, his trust in God is enlarged: and when he comes to realize the idea, that there is nothing, whether great or small, that is not ordered by God, nor any situation which he cannot, or will not, overrule for our good, if only we put our trust in him; and when, in consequence of this conviction, his whole care for body and for soul, for time and for eternity, is cast on God,

God, and he rests on God's promises "without staggering at any through unbelief;" then he honours God as he ought, and his heart may be said to be perfect towards God. The difference between a person who has not attained this perfection, and one who has, may be seen in Elisha and his servant: the one, though well instructed, and habituated to serve God, is troubled when he comes into circumstances of great and unexpected trial; whilst the other is composed, seeing the horses of fire and the chariots of fire forming an impregnable bulwark all around him, and God himself engaged for his support[a] — — —]

2. When our desire to serve him is supreme—

[Many are the considerations which arise in the mind to influence us in the discharge of our duty. Inclination, interest, passion, the fear of man, the hope of applause, will often bias our judgment, and lead us astray. The truth is, that in all wrong conduct the heart is more to blame than we are ready to imagine: it is the film in the eye that disguises and distorts the objects: "if the eye were single, the whole body would be full of light." And here again the difference between Christians of different stature is very apparent: those of lower attainments being open to impression from a vast diversity of objects, whilst those of higher attainments keep their eyes steadily fixed on one object. It is surprising how clear the path of duty becomes, when a man discards every question but this, "What will most please my God?" But this question must be asked, not only in reference to things positively good and evil, but in reference to things in which we seem at liberty to adopt either alternative. Where this principle fully occupies the mind, and operates with promptness and decision, swallowing up every inferior consideration[b], there the heart is perfect towards God, and the man "stands perfect and complete in all the will of God."]

Let us mark,

II. What tender regard God shews for persons of that character—

"He despises not the day of small things;" but those who thus honour him, shall be most abundantly honoured by him:

1. He will shew himself strong in their behalf—

[There is nothing that he will not do for them, either in a way *of providence*, or *of grace*. Are they in difficulties or trials of any kind? We say not, that he will work miracles for them as for Israel in the wilderness, or for his servants the Prophets; but we do say that what he did visibly for them, he will do invisibly

[a] 2 Kin. vi. 15—17. [b] Acts iv. 19, 20. & xxi. 13.

sibly for all who trust in him: and we conceive it of great importance to observe, that the miracles of former ages were not intended *only* for the comfort of those in whose behalf they were wrought, or for the confirming of the messages delivered by them, but *also* for *demonstrating to the very senses of men what a minute attention he would pay to the concerns of all his people, and what effectual succour he would impart unto them in every time of need.* As the imputation of righteousness to Abraham by faith was not recorded for his sake alone, but for that of Believers in all ages[c], so the miracles wrought, whether for him or others, were not wrought for their sakes alone, but for ours also, who shall experience similar interpositions, only in a less visible way: for them he accomplished ends *without* means; for us he will accomplish them *by* means: nor have we any more reason to be anxious about events than the most favoured of his servants had in the days of old[d].

Assuredly too will he afford us under spiritual trials the assistance of his grace. The promises, "My grace is sufficient for thee;" and, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee;" are as valid at this day as they were in the days of Paul and Joshua: nor can there be any temptation whatever which we shall not be enabled to surmount, if only we trust in him[e].]

2. He will search out all occasions for such displays of his power—

[We have not to awaken him by our cries, or to prevail upon him by our pleadings, as though he were of himself either inattentive to us, or adverse to undertake our cause. It is not for *this* end that our prayers and tears are required; but for the impressing of our own minds, that all our help must come from him. His eye is upon us from the first moment that we begin to think of him; yea, his eyes run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to find out the objects, as it were, who feel their need of him. Whether they be in a cottage or a dungeon, he will fly to their aid, and delight to make known towards them "the exceeding greatness of his power[f]," and "the exceeding riches of his grace[g]." Whilst Satan, their great adversary, "goes to and fro through the earth" "seeking whom he may devour," our God will surely not be less vigilant in our defence. His whole heart and his whole soul are engaged for us[h], nor will he lose one whom he has given to his beloved Son[i].]

As an IMPROVEMENT of this subject, we will suggest a few words,

1. Of warning—

[Let *those who neglect God* consider that his eyes are over them

[c] Rom. iv. 22—24. [d] Phil. iv. 6. [e] 1 Cor. x. 13.
[f] Eph. i. 18, 19. [g] Eph. ii. 7. [h] Jer. xxxii. 40, 41.
[i] John x. 27—29. Luke xii. 32.

them no less than over the righteous; but it is in order to bring upon them all the evil that he has denounced against them[j] ——— And let *those who profess to know him, but in works deny him*, remember, that it will be of little profit to "have a name to live, if they are either dead, or dying" in his sight[k] ——— Above all, let *those who*, like Asa, *are in the main "perfect before God,"* beware how they resent the reproofs that may be given them for any failures in their duty[l]: for, though they should be saved at last, they little know what *dereliction* or *punishment*[m] they may suffer for their fault before they die ———]

2. Of encouragement—

[Let not any say, "The Lord hath forsaken me, and my God hath forgotten me." "Can a woman forget her sucking child? *She* may; but *God* never will" forsake the meanest of his people[n]. Think not of the greatness of your difficulties, but of the love, and power, and faithfulness of your God ——— Then in the midst of your warfare, you may already begin the shouts of victory[o] ——— Only believe, and you shall assuredly "see the glory of God[p]."]

[j] Amos ix. 4. Prov. v. 21. [k] Rev. iii. 2. [l] ver. 10.
[m] Both of these are seen in v. 12. [n] Isai. xlix. 14, 15.
[o] Rom. viii. 33—39. [p] John xi. 40.

CCLXXVII.

THE ROYAL EDICT.

ADVERTISEMENT.—It being thought expedient to re-publish in this Country the following Sermon, the author feels it necessary to prefix to it some short account of the occasion on which it was delivered.

The author was at Amsterdam, (in June 1818,) partly with a view of re-establishing there an Episcopal Chapel, in which there had been no service for seven years, but principally with a view of seeking the welfare of the Children of Israel. He went thither rather to explore than to act. (See Neh. ii. 12—16.) But just previous to the 18th of June, he understood that the Third Anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo was to be kept throughout the Netherlands, as a day of thanksgiving: and just at that time also he quite accidentally heard, that the King of the Netherlands had *a year before* issued an Edict, requiring all the Jews to educate their children in the knowledge of their own Scriptures, and calling upon all his Christian Subjects to aid in this good work.

Despondency,

Despondency, not unlike to that which paralyzed all exertion at Jerusalem in Nehemiah's days, so universally prevailed, that no one had risen to the occasion; the very Commissioners, who had been appointed to carry the Edict into effect, had published a Report, in which they gave it as their opinion, "that the Lord's time was not come;" and there was great danger that the gracious designs of the Monarch would be altogether frustrated. The author therefore judged this a fit occasion for calling the attention of the Public to the Edict; and accordingly, after devoting the Morning Service to the more appropriate subject of the day, he employed the Evening Service in an endeavour to forward this good work. Considerable attention was excited to the subject by means of the Sermon; which was therefore instantly printed in Dutch, French, and English, for the purpose of its being circulated throughout the Netherlands: and he has reason to hope, that active exertions will now be made in many places, to promote, what every benevolent mind must ardently desire, the edification and welfare of the Jewish People.

So good an example having been set by the Emperor of Russia and the King of the Netherlands, the author hopes that the attention of our own Governors also, both in Church and State, may be called to this long-neglected People; and that, now the British Public has been invited by Authority to aid in supporting Missions to the *Heathen World*, the claims of *the Jewish Nation*, to whom under God we owe all the light that we ourselves enjoy, will not be overlooked. It is with a view to this great object, that the author sends forth the Sermon in this Country; where, if the foregoing explanation had not been given, its relevancy and use might have been justly called in question.

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2 Chron. xvii. 9. *And they taught in Judah, and had the Book of the Law of the Lord with them, and went about throughout all the cities of Judah, and taught the people.*

ON a day set apart for thanksgiving to God for mercies received, it is peculiarly proper to consider what we may render unto the Lord for all his benefits. Certainly, if any event ever deserved repeated annual commemoration, it is that which has freed the world from the most grievous tyranny that ever

it

it endured. Of the bitter cup which was put into the hands of every nation in Europe, this nation[a] drank very deeply: and the change which it has experienced, in the restoration of their rightful Monarch, and in the establishment of a free Constitution, calls for their devoutest acknowledgments to Almighty God. Doubtless we may with justice pay some tribute of honour to those who by their counsels and their arms effected the overthrow of the Usurper: but it is God alone who giveth victory to kings, and to whom the glory of this great victory must be primarily ascribed: and he who accounts a day consecrated to this service superfluous, shews, that he is far from justly appreciating the blessings that have been conferred upon him. The monarch himself has given to his people a very decided evidence, that *he* feels the depth of his obligations to the God of his salvation: and it will be your own loss if you do not cultivate a similar spirit, and improve the occasion to the honour of your God.

But it is not to thanksgiving only that your Monarch invites you: he calls you, by a special Edict, to unite with him in seeking the welfare of your Jewish Brethren, who, in their struggle with the enemy, signally approved their fidelity to their legitimate Sovereign. Their welfare he in his turn studies to promote; and he desires to combine the energies of all his subjects in efforts for their good. Methinks he is like Jehosaphat of old, who, well knowing that piety must be founded in knowledge, and happiness in piety, sent forth the Princes of his empire, with a select number of Priests and Levites, to instruct his people in the knowledge of God's blessed word.

His edict on this occasion, and the manner in which it was carried into effect, will form the subject of my present discourse.

I^st^, then, we notice the edict of King Jehosaphat.

This was such as became a great and pious monarch: and we shall find it not unprofitable or unsuitable to the present occasion, to enter into a distinct

[a] The Netherlands.

distinct consideration of it. We observe then, that it was a *kind and benevolent* edict; a *wise and politic* edict; a *good and beneficial* edict.

Mark *the benevolence* displayed in it. He sought the present and eternal welfare of his subjects. He knew, that as men are raised above the beasts by the exercise of reason, so are they elevated in the scale of rational Beings, in proportion as their intellectual powers are cultivated and enlarged. Man destitute of knowledge, is a mere savage; but when instructed in the various branches of science, he becomes refined, and civilized, and capable of contributing to the general good. In the very cultivation of knowledge there is much pleasure arising to the mind; and in the application of that knowledge to useful purposes there is an exquisite delight. We need only observe persons when employed in their several vocations, how happy they are, how contented, how cheerful, oftentimes unconsciously proclaiming their happiness, like the birds of the air, in festal songs, or consciously, and with devotion, in songs of praise.

But it was not mere intellectual improvement which Jehosaphat sought to convey; he wished his people to be instructed in the knowledge of that God whom they professed to fear and worship. This alone could make them truly happy: this alone could impart to them sound wisdom or solid consolation. He therefore gave particular directions that they should be taught "in the Book of the Law of the Lord," and *this* throughout the whole land. O happy people, whose Governor so employed the authority with which he was invested! And happy that monarch, who so improved his influence, not for his own personal aggrandizement, but for the best interests of the people committed to his charge! In so doing, he approved himself to be indeed what every Governor should be, the Friend and Father of his people.

Nor was *the policy* of this measure at all inferior to its benevolence. A people well instructed in moral and religious knowledge will view government

ment as an ordinance of God, and will learn to obey the constituted Authorities, not so much from fear of their wrath, as for conscience sake towards God. They will view their Governors as God's vicegerents upon earth; and will consider allegiance to *them* as an essential part of their duty to *him*. Hence will spring up love in their hearts, and a real delight in manifesting, on all proper occasions, their loyalty to their King: they will form a bulwark around his person in case of necessity, and even glory in laying down their lives for him as their greatest benefactor.

The *benefits* arising from this edict were incalculable. Such was the effect of it, that the fear of Jehosaphat, and of Jehovah as his protector, fell on all the nations that were round about him; so that none, however hostile in their hearts, dared to make war against him[aa]. Doubtless this resulted chiefly from an impression made upon their minds by God himself: yet it was also produced by a dread of that energy which an united people were ready to put forth at any instant, at the call of their beloved monarch. At the same time that peace was thus secured, prosperity reigned in every part of the empire; and, as the immediate fruit of it, Jehosaphat, as well as the people, "had riches and honour in abundance[b]." In his own mind too he reaped the fruits of his own benevolence. God smiled upon him, and manifested himself to him, and enabled him to walk with "his heart lifted up in the ways of the Lord[c]."

Such was the edict of the pious Jehosaphat,—benevolent, politic, beneficial. And what, I would ask, is the Edict which has been issued by the highest authority in this kingdom? Do we not see in it the same blessed characters as in that which we have been considering? It was "in the third year of his reign[d]" that Jehosaphat sent forth teachers to enlighten and instruct his subjects. The very instant he felt himself at liberty from the more urgent and pressing calls of duty, (such as the fortifying of his land

[aa] ver. 10. [b] ver. 5. [c] ver. 6. [d] ver. 7.

land against foreign enemies, and the correcting of some great internal abuses,) he engaged in this good work of diffusing light and knowledge through all classes of the community. In like manner the Sovereign of this kingdom has scarcely had time to repair the ravages of war, and to establish his empire, too long weakened and impoverished by a cruel usurpation, before he stands forth as the Friend and Father of his people, and more especially of that portion of them who have in every age and place been most treated with neglect and disdain, to have them educated in Scriptural knowledge and in the fear of God. It is much to be lamented, that the Jewish People have not in general been so attentive either to the learning or morals of their children as might be wished: and hence arose a necessity for some authoritative admonition on the subject. Yet, if I may say it without offence, this neglect has not been more reprehensible in them, than has been the indifference with which the Christian world has regarded it. The monarch, (may God recompense it richly into his bosom!) has risen up to remedy the supineness both of the one and the other, and to call forth the united energies of all to correct and terminate this evil. Yet, whilst he thus consults the best interests of his subjects, with what paternal tenderness has he guarded against wounding the feelings of any, or exciting their religious prejudices! The Scriptures of the Old Testament are alone to be used in the Schools that shall be established; even those Scriptures, which Jews as well as Christians believe to have been given by inspiration of God, and to contain truth without any mixture of error. In this is marked the policy, no less than the benevolence, of the Edict; for it is not by constraint, but by conciliation and kindness, that good is to be done to any, and more especially to those who have shewn themselves now, for so many centuries, proof against all the efforts of intimidation or force. In this kingdom they form no small body, and, I may add, no unimportant portion of the community. It

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is well known how extensive is their influence in the affairs of commerce; and how, by their activity, they contribute to enrich the State. Hence it is now generally seen and felt, that they are entitled to the same respect as any other subjects of the realm; and whilst, as in the present instance, they see how deeply their monarch feels interested in their welfare, they cannot but on *their* part be sensible of the privileges they enjoy under his paternal government, and testify their gratitude to him by every possible expression of loyalty and affection.

What the ultimate effect of these measures will be, may be conjectured from the blessed results of the edict of Jehosaphat: all will feel themselves happy under the government of such a prince; and he, whilst he is respected abroad, and beloved at home, will have the happiness of seeing his labours crowned with prosperity throughout his dominions, and with peace in his own soul.

The manner in which Jehosaphat's edict was carried into execution is now, in the

II[d] place, to be noticed.

The promptness with which his commands were executed deserves the highest praise. All were ready to co-operate in this good work as soon as it was proposed. "Princes, and Priests, and Levites[e]," all addressed themselves to it instantly, with one heart and one soul. None accounted their dignity so high, or their functions so sacred, but they thought it an honour to be employed in such a service, and found a delight in fulfilling the wishes of their revered monarch: all entered into the work with zeal, and prosecuted it with diligence; and hence a rapid change was effected both in the temporal and spiritual condition of the whole nation. And what may not be effected in this kingdom also, if a similar zeal be exercised by "the Princes and Priests," (the Magistrates and Clergy) of the land? With them it must begin. Those who move in a lower station can effect nothing, if they be not aided and

[e] ver. 7, 8.

and countenanced by the higher orders, whose rank in life, or sacredness of character, will give a tone to the general feeling, and combine the energies of the whole kingdom. If it be said, that those for whom the benefit is designed do not feel a desire after it, this only shews how much they need it, and how earnestly we should all embark in a cause proposed by such high authority, and recommended by the soundest dictates of wisdom and piety.

That our obligations to unite in this labour of love may the more distinctly appear, I would beg leave to suggest the following considerations.

First, *Loyalty to the King demands our concurrence with him in this good work*, and a holy emulation amongst us to carry into effect his benevolent designs. What can the greatest or best of men effect, (what could Jehosaphat himself have done?) if there be none to act in subserviency to them, and to follow their directions? As the most potent monarch upon earth would in vain proclaim war, if there were no soldiers found to enlist under his banners and to execute his commands, so it will be in vain that the design of benefiting the Jewish People was ever conceived in the mind of the King, or that his Edict respecting them was ever issued, if his Subjects do not put forth their energies in obedience to his call. In truth, a backwardness to co-operate with him in this blessed work would seem like a reflection cast upon him, as recommending a measure that was unworthy of attention. I do not mean to insinuate that such an idea really exists in the minds of any; for I am perfectly convinced it does not: but certainly in appearance it is open to this construction; and every subject of the empire is concerned to act in such a way, as to cut off all occasion for a reflection like this. I say, loyalty alone, even if we had no higher motive, should be sufficient to call forth our exertions in this cause.

But let me next observe, that *gratitude to the Jewish nation demands it at our hands.* How great, how manifold are our obligations to them! Behold

Moses

Moses and the Prophets, what instruction have they given us, in reference to the way of life and salvation! Without the moral law, as revealed by Moses, we should never have known to what an extent we need a Saviour; nor, if the Prophecies had not so fully designated the promised Messiah, could we have ever so fully known that Jesus was the Christ. Of whom did the Lord Jesus Christ himself come as pertaining to the flesh, but from the loins of David, and of the seed of Abraham? Yet to him are we indebted for all that we either have, or hope for, in time or in eternity. And who were the Apostles, but Jews, who for our sakes went forth preaching the word, and counted not their lives dear to them, so that they might but lead us to the knowledge of Christ, and make us partakers of his salvation? From them too we have received the lively oracles, which are the one source of all spiritual knowledge, and the one foundation of all our hopes. Does all this call for no recompence at our hands? Knowing as we do the vast importance of education, should we not endeavour to impart it to those from whose ancestors we have received such innumerable, such inestimable benefits? Yet behold, these are the people whom for many, many centuries, we have treated with more neglect and contempt than any other people upon the face of the earth: the savages of the most distant climes have received more attention from us than they. Surely it is high time that the Christian world awake to a sense of their duty, and begin to shew to the Jews somewhat of that love, which *their* forefathers exercised towards us in our Gentile state. We are debtors to them to a vast amount, and it is high time that we begin to discharge our debt. And how can we discharge it better, than by enabling them to read and understand those very oracles, which they have preserved with such fidelity, and which testify so fully of their promised Messiah?

Further: *A love to the rising generation should lead us to avail ourselves of the present opportunity to promote*

promote their welfare.—It is truly afflictive to see how low and degraded is the state of multitudes, especially of the Jewish nation, purely through the neglect with which they are treated in their early youth: and still more grievous is it to reflect on their ignorance of those things which belong to their everlasting peace. To counteract this, we should endeavour to qualify the whole of their population for good and useful employments; and, through the medium of useful instruction, to make them holy, and to make them happy. We need never be afraid that there will not be a sufficient number of poor to fill the lower stations: do what we will, there will never be wanting persons, who, through their own fault or misfortunes, are necessitated to undertake the lowest offices of life. And, if they have been previously instructed in the Scriptures of Truth, they will have a fund of consolation ever open to them in their deepest afflictions; they will learn from the inspired volume, in whatsoever state they are, therewith to be content; and in the prospect of the eternal world, they will find joys with which a stranger intermeddleth not, and which the world can neither give nor take away. We feel the force of these considerations in reference to the poor of our own communion: how is it that we feel it not in reference to our Jewish Brethren? This is a partiality unworthy of us; and we should rise as one man to wipe off this disgrace from our own character.

This brings me to the last consideration which I propose to mention; namely, that *a concern for the honour of our holy religion should operate to unite us all in executing the Royal Edict.*—What must a Jew think of our religion, when he sees how little it has wrought for us in the production of love? We may tell him of a Messiah, who has loved us, and laid down his life for us: but what credit will he give us for our principles, when he sees how little our practice corresponds with them! May he not well say to us, "Physician, heal thyself"? Shew by your conduct the superiority of your principles,

before you call on me to embrace them. It is by love that we must win them: it is by shewing kindness to them that we must efface from their hearts those prejudices which, with too much reason, they entertain against us. We must exhibit in our own person the loveliness of Christianity, before we can bring them to investigate the grounds of our faith, or to imagine that they can improve their own condition by embracing it. May I not then call upon you as Christians to unite in the good work that is now before you, that you may thereby serve and glorify your Lord and Saviour? As Christians, you believe that there is no other way to the Father but by Christ[f]; and no other name but his, whereby any human being can be saved[g]. Where is your piety, where is your love to Christ, where is even common humanity, if you will not avail yourselves of the present opportunity to remove from before your Jewish Brethren the stumbling-blocks, which for so many ages have been laid in their way?

Do any ask, What shall we do? I answer, search out amongst the Jews some persons of probity and talent to commence Schools among them; and do you yourselves aid to the utmost of your power in the support of them; provide them with all necessary books for instructing children in the first rudiments of knowledge; provide them with Bibles also, both in the Dutch and Hebrew languages, that they may be thoroughly instructed in the knowledge of their own religion, and learn to walk in the steps of their father Abraham, and of all the holy Prophets.

Begin too, without loss of time, *Adult Schools*. You will find many among the House of Israel who will be glad to avail themselves of your instructions. Let those who are benevolent amongst you dedicate an hour in a day to the instructing of a few who may be desirous to learn; and carefully avoid every thing which may give unnecessary offence. Confine yourselves to the Old Testament, which they venerate, as well as you. Let those who can teach only

[f] John xiv. 6. [g] Acts iv. 12.

only in the Dutch language give instruction in that: and let those who either understand, or have leisure to attain, the Hebrew tongue, draw their attention to that. In particular, let it be the united endeavour of all to qualify Masters for this good work.

And let it not be thought, that this is the duty of Men only. The Royal Edict has, particularly, and with great wisdom, recommended it to Females, who may be of infinite service in conveying instruction to their own sex. This age is distinguished above all others for the activity of Females in the service of God, and in the performance of every good work. Were I able to declare the proportion of good that is done in Britain by the Female Sex, it would appear incredible: I believe from my soul that it far exceeds one half in all the Societies raised since the commencement of the present century, in the Bible Society, the Missionary Societies, and the Society for promoting the Knowledge of Christianity amongst the Jews: yes, let the Ladies of this country exert themselves, in a prudent, modest and discreet way, and the effects will soon appear; the Royal Edict will not be a dead letter, but will produce incalculable good to the whole nation;—and the agents in this benevolent work will themselves receive quite as much benefit as they impart, their benevolence being, in proportion as it is exercised, its own reward.

CCLXXVIII.

JEHOSAPHAT'S CONNEXION WITH AHAB REPROVED.

2 Chron. xix. 2. *And Jehu, the son of Hanani the Seer, went out to meet him, and said to king Jehosaphat, Shouldest thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the Lord? Therefore is wrath upon thee from before the Lord.*

IT is happy when pious children rise up in the places of their parents, and, unmoved by the sufferings which their fathers have experienced, dare to tread in their steps with fidelity and zeal.

Hanani, the father of Jehu, had been cast into prison for the faithful reproof which he administered to king Asa[a]: yet does Jehu give a similar reproof to Asa's son and successor, Jehosaphat: and, as he was enabled to temper his reproof with seasonable commendation, he succeeded in convincing the monarch of his fault, and in stirring him up to a more becoming conduct.

The conduct here blamed, was, Jehosaphat's uniting himself with Ahab against the king of Syria: but the terms in which the censure was conveyed, are of more general import, and may be applied to all alliances with the ungodly. We will endeavour therefore to improve them, by shewing,

I. What is that intimacy with the ungodly which God forbids—

We are not to suppose that *all* connexion with them is forbidden; for then, as the Apostle says, "We must needs go out of the world," since the necessities of our nature constrain us to keep up some sort of intercourse with them. Moreover, there is an attention to them which *compassion* itself demands, and which our blessed Saviour himself manifested to such a degree, as to incur the reproach of being "a friend of publicans and sinners." Nor are we to forget, that *courtesy* is one of the most amiable and important of Christian graces. "Be pitiful, be courteous," is the command of God himself: and they who are grossly deficient in relation to this duty, as too many professors of religion are, have greatly mistaken the true genius of Christianity, which is, in every possible modification of it, a religion of love.

Yet is there a very broad line of distinction to be drawn between the extremes of unmeasured union with the world, and a contemptuous abstraction from it. Though the righteous are not to despise the ungodly, they are carefully to avoid,

1. An alliance with them—

[Under

[a] Ch. xvi. 7—10.

[Under the law, all intermarriages with the heathen were strictly forbidden: and under the Gospel the same law applies to the ungodly: the Apostle's direction respecting those who are seeking a matrimonal alliance, is, "Let them marry, *only in the Lord*[b]." In many places of Scripture are the evils arising from unequal marriages of believers with unbelievers, strongly marked[c]: we must not wonder then that such contracts are expressly forbidden[d].]

2. A conformity to them—

[They who are of the world, both speak of the world, and act agreeably to its dictates: they have no higher objects in view, than "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life." But these are wholly unsuited to the Christian's state: they are in direct opposition to that holy and heavenly course which he is commanded to pursue[e]: and therefore he is enjoined "on no account to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of his mind, that he may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God[f]."]

3. An unnecessary association with them—

[We should not choose them as our friends and companions: for "how can two walk together, except they be agreed?" We almost of necessity imbibe the spirit of our associates; and therefore we should select for our acquaintance those who will help us forward, and not those who will retard us, in our heavenly course. We can never too attentively consider that instructive declaration of Solomon, "He that walketh with wise men, will be wise; but a companion of fools will be destroyed[g]."]

That such intimacy with the ungodly is not prohibited by God without reason, will appear, whilst we shew,

II. Why it is so displeasing to him—

God was greatly offended with Jehosaphat, and severely punished him for his fault. It was *in consequence of his alliance with Ahab* that his eldest son Jehoram slew all his younger brethren[h], and that all his grand-children were slain by Jehu[i]. And in every instance, such intimacy with the ungodly is offensive to him;

1. On

[b] 1 Cor. vii. 39.
[c] Gen. vi. 2, 3. and in Jehosaphat's own son; 2 Chron. xxi. 6.
[d] 2 Cor. vi. 14—16. [e] 1 John ii. 15, 16. [f] Rom. xii. 2.
[g] Prov. xiii. 20. [h] 2 Chron. xxi. 4.
[i] 2 Kin. x. 13, 14. and especially 2 Chron. xxii. 7, 8.

1. On account of the state of mind it implies—

[It is evident that any person professing godliness, and at the same time affecting the society of the ungodly, must be in a very degenerate state. Such a state of mind indicates in a very high degree, *a want of love to God—a want of aversion to sin—a want of self-knowledge*—and *a want of common prudence*.

How low must be his *love to God!* Would any man who loved his parents and his family select for his intimate friend a man that was the avowed enemy of them all? Yet the character of the ungodly is, that they are "haters of God[k]:" how then can any one who truly loves God, take such a person for his bosom friend, or maintain, except from necessity, any intercourse with him?

And small indeed must be his *aversion to sin*, when he can find pleasure in those who belong to "a world that lieth in wickedness," and whose whole life is a continued and voluntary course of sin.

His self-knowledge too must be at a very low ebb, if he think that he can frequent such company without having both his principles and his practice greatly vitiated.

Even to *common prudence* he is almost an utter stranger: for would any man on the brink of a stupendous precipice go unnecessarily to the utmost edge of it, where it was exceeding rough and slippery, rather than pursue a path which was comparatively both safe and easy? Yet this is his conduct, who chooses to mix unnecessarily with a tempting and ensnaring world: and the absurdity of it is strongly marked in the expressions of our text, where an APPEAL is made to *the common sense and reason of mankind*; "Shouldest thou love them that hate the Lord?"]

2. On account of its pernicious tendency—

[We form very erroneous calculations on this subject. We are ready to think that we shall ingratiate ourselves with the world, and recommend religion to their favourable acceptance: but the very reverse is the case; we lower ourselves in their estimation, and make them think better of their own religion than they would otherwise do. They take for granted that religion sanctions all that conformity to their customs that they see in us; and consequently that they are much nearer to the standard of true religion than they really are: nor are they a whit more reconciled to those practices which they do not choose to follow, and which, in spite of all our efforts, they will account overrighteous, unnecessary, and absurd. It will be found almost invariably that little, if any, good accrues to the ungodly from such sacrifices, and that great injury is sustained by those who make them.

In

[k] Rom. i. 30. 2 Tim. viii. 7.

In the chapter preceding our text, we may see the experiment fairly made. Jehosaphat having joined affinity with Ahab, paid him a friendly visit, and was hospitably received by him[l]. Presently Ahab proposed to him an union of their forces in an attack on the king of Syria; to which proposal Jehosaphat, unwilling to refuse him, accedes; but, being a pious character, recommends that an inquiry should be first made of God for his direction. To this Ahab apparently agrees; but consults none except his own idolatrous prophets[m]. Jehosaphat, not quite satisfied with *their* advice, asks if there be not a prophet of Jehovah by whom their inquiry may be made? Ahab acknowledges that there was; but that he could not endure that prophet, because he never prophesied good concerning him, but evil. This aversion Jehosaphat tries to soften; and for a moment prevails[n]: but, as soon as Micaiah has delivered his message from the Lord, Ahab is filled with rage against him, and orders him to be put in prison, and to be fed with the bread and water of affliction: and Jehosaphat, contrary to God's revealed will, proceeds with Ahab to execute the plan proposed[o]. Now here is an exact representation of what generally takes place in such connexions: the compliances that are required by the ungodly, are too faintly refused; whilst the barriers interposed by the godly, produce no adequate effect. The two parties may not unfitly be compared to persons pulling against each other on a steep declivity: the one who is on the more elevated scite, may think he shall prevail; but a moment's experience will suffice to shew him, that his adversary draws against him with a tenfold advantage, both as it respects the comparative force which he is able to exert, and the greater facility with which a descending motion may be produced. Thus it is between the godly and the ungodly, when too intimate a fellowship subsists between them: the conscience of the one is ensnared and violated, whilst the other retains all his principles, dispositions, and habits.]

3. On account of its opposition to his revealed will—

[Nothing can be plainer than God's declarations respecting the friendship of the world: it is actually a state of "enmity against God:" yea, the very desire to possess its friendship is constructive treason against God himself; and actually *constitutes* treason, as much as the holding of forbidden intercourse with an earthly enemy constitutes treason against the king[p]. It is in vain to dispute against such a solemn declaration as this, or to think that we can ever reconcile such opposite interests as those of "God and Mammon." We must hold to the one, or to the other: and if we choose the friendship of the world, then must we

[l] 2 Chron. xviii. 1, 2. [m] ib. ver. 3—5. [n] ib. ver. 6—8.
[o] ib. ver. 16, 17, 25—28. [p] Jam. iv. 4. See the Greek.

we expect to be dealt with as the enemies of God. If we are found associated with the goats in this world, it is in vain to hope that we shall be numbered with the sheep in the world to come[q].]

ADDRESS—

[The character of Jehosaphat was on the whole good: "good things were found in him; and he had prepared his heart to seek God[r]." Now it is to persons of this character more particularly that our subject must be addressed: for the ungodly, when mixing with the world, are in their proper element; and the established Christian feels but little temptation to go back to worldly pleasures, or to worldly society. But the temptation to young and inexperienced Christians is great. Be it remembered however by all, that the true disciples of our Lord "are not of the world, even as he was not of the world." They cannot say to an ungodly man, "I am as thou art;" for they are as different from him as light from darkness. "By the cross of Christ, they are crucified unto the world, as the world also is to them[s]." Let me intreat you then, Brethren, not to "be unequally yoked together with unbelievers, but to come out from among them, and be separate[t];" and endeavour to be in reality, what all the Lord's people are by profession, "a city set upon a hill," and "lights shining in a dark place."]

[q] Matt. xxv. 32, 33. [r] ver. 3. [s] Gal. vi. 14.
[t] 2 Cor. vi. 14, 17.

CCLXXIX.

PRAYER THE BEST MEANS OF DEFEATING INVASION.*

2 Chron. xx. 2—4. *Then there came some that told Jehosaphat, saying, There cometh a great multitude against thee from beyond the sea on this side Syria; and, behold, they be in Hazazon-tamar, which is En-gedi. And Jehosaphat feared, and set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. And Judah gathered themselves together to ask help of the Lord; even out of all the cities of Judah they came to seek the Lord.*

THERE is scarcely any thing that more awfully proves men's fallen state than their readiness to devour one another. There is not a nation under heaven where the art of war is not cultivated; and he who attains the highest proficiency in that art, and is crowned with most success in destroying his fellow-

* Fast-day Sermon, Oct. 19, 1803.

fellow-creatures, is deemed the greatest benefactor to his country, and is rewarded with all the honours that can be heaped upon him. Under these circumstances it is not optional with a nation whether they will have a military force: they are compelled to maintain armies, and to preserve their lives and liberties by the same means that others use to subjugate and overwhelm them. Yet there are other means of self-defence, which, though they do not supersede the use of arms, are more effectual than numerous levies, or military skill. What these means are, the text informs us. Jehosaphat was invaded by three confederate armies; and, though taken by surprise, and consequently not having an hour to lose in mustering his forces, he devoted a day to humiliation and prayer for the Divine aid. This to many would seem absurd: but to those who believe in the all-governing providence of God, it will appear the most rational and most efficacious method of defence, which it was possible for him to adopt.

In considering this account of Jehosaphat, we shall point out,

I. His feelings on the approach of an invasion—

We have no reason to think that Jehosaphat was defective in courage; yet he "feared." But what was it that he dreaded? was it merely his own personal danger? No; he feared,

1. The calamities that were coming on the nation—

[Fear even of personal danger is by no means incompatible with real courage. It is an affection planted in the human breast by God himself, and is necessary to put us on our guard, and to stir us up to use the means of safety. It is then only to be deemed a weakness, when it incapacitates us for deliberate counsel, or manly exertion. But when the danger is public, and the welfare of a whole nation is at stake, then it is criminal not to fear: thoughtlessness and indifference then become most inexcusable, inasmuch as they manifest an atheistical security with respect to themselves, and an utter want of humanity towards others. Who can reflect on the miseries that an invading army may occasion, and not tremble for the land that is exposed to them? We confess, that one of the worst symptoms that appear in

in *our* land at this present moment, is, the general, and almost total, want of this fear. It should seem as if we thought it out of the power of man, or even of God himself, to hurt us. We are really sleeping, while our enemies are watchful; and folding our arms in security, while the gathering storm is ready to burst upon us. Would to God that we had more fear of the approaching danger! and then we should have less cause to fear when it was actually arrived.]

2. The displeasure of God in them—

[This it is which makes an invading army terrible. This renders even the weakest insect, a locust, or a caterpillar, an object of dread[a]. We are sure that "men are God's sword;" and that whatever be the motive that actuates them, it is *he* who gives them their commission, it is *he* who sends them to "avenge the quarrel of his covenant[b]." Now Jehosaphat had particular reason to apprehend the Divine displeasure, having incurred it by making an alliance with Ahab[c]: and doubtless he considered the invaders as persons sent of God to inflict the punishment he deserved. And was not this just ground for fear?

Here again we cannot but lament that the generality amongst us leave God out of their thoughts: they declaim against the ambition of him who would reduce us, as he has done one half of Europe, to a state of vassalage; but they never associate with his plans the idea of God's displeasure. To say that "God had stirred him up against us[d]," would be looked upon as absurd: to suggest that he was an instrument in God's hands, lifted up to punish our sins, would be deemed a weak enthusiastic notion, a dream of a distempered imagination. But this is true, whether we will believe it or not: and it is *this*, much more than either the number of his forces, or the inveteracy of his malice, which renders him formidable. Were he far less equal to the contest than he is, our multiplied iniquities which have incensed God against us, might well make him an object of terror. And the less we fear him as the instrument of God's wrath, the more likely we are to be given over to his power.]

Corresponding with Jehosaphat's feelings on account of the invasion were,

II. The means he used to defeat it—

Doubtless he did not neglect any prudent means of defence which his circumstances would admit of. But, together with these,

"He

[a] Alluding to the plagues of Egypt.
[b] Lev. xxvi. 25. 2 Kin. xxiv. 2, 3. [c] 2 Chron. xix. 2.
[d] 1 Sam. xxvi. 19. 1 Kin. xi. 14, 23. 1 Chron. v. 26. & 2 Chron. xxi. 16.

"He set himself to seek the Lord" by fasting and prayer—

[Jehosaphat well knew that all things were subject to God's controul; that the events of war were in *his* hands[e]; and that it was equally easy with *him* to "save by many or by few[f]." He knew that God was ever ready to forgive those who confessed and forsook their sins, and to interpose for the preservation of those who trusted in him. Under this conviction he not only fasted and prayed himself, but "proclaimed a fast," in order that all his subjects might join in these holy exercises, and, by their united importunity, prevail on God to spare them. It might have been thought, that to consecrate a day to such a service, when there seemed not an hour to spare, was impolitic: but he was aware that the greatest preparations without God would avail nothing; and that, if *his* favour and assistance were secured, no enemies could ever prevail against him. In this holy service therefore he engaged with earnestness; and all his subjects, male and female, old and young, concurred with him[g].]

This was, in truth, the most effectual means he could employ—

[If we consider how successfully these means had been employed in former times, the wisdom of his conduct will immediately appear. God had on many occasions *given direction* to his people, where, and when, and how, to attack their enemies[h]. He had *strengthened* them miraculously for the combat[i]; and *crowned them with success* beyond all human expectation[k]. He had invariably done this in answer to their humble and earnest supplications[l]: and had as constantly withheld his succours, when they refused to humble themselves before him. There was one example in particular, with which he was well acquainted, and from which he could not fail to derive encouragement; it was that of Moses when attacked by Amalek: Moses sent Joshua into the valley to fight, whilst he himself remained on the mountain to pray; and it soon appeared that the success of the engagement did not depend on the skill or valour of Joshua, but on the holding up of the hands of Moses: when they were let down through weariness, Amalek prevailed; but on their being held up till sunset, victory was decided in favour of Israel[m]. This was sufficient to justify and encourage Jehosaphat in the proclaiming of a fast: and the event strongly recommends to us the use of similar means in any similar emergency. God heard and answered his prayer; and

[e] ver. 6, 15. [f] 1 Sam. xiv. 6. [g] ver. 13.
[h] 2 Sam. v. 23—25. [i] 2 Sam. xxiii. 8—12.
[k] 1 Sam. xiv. 13—16.
[l] Prayer was the cause of *Othniel's* victory, Judg. iii. 9. & *Ehud's*, ib. v. 15. & *Barak's*, Judg. iv. 3. & *Gideon's*, Judg. vi. 6. & *Jephthah's*, Judg. x. 10. [m] Exod. xvii. 11—13.

and did not suffer him even to risk his life in battle: he caused dissention to arise in the confederate armies, insomuch that two of those armies combined to destroy the third, and then destroyed each other, and left all their spoil for a prey to those whose country they had invaded[n].]

INFER—

1. What reason have we for thankfulness on account of the appointment of this fast!

[Many, forgetful of Jehosaphat's example, deny the right of the Civil Magistrate to proclaim a fast: and multitudes who acknowledge the propriety of such an appointment, are as regardless of the duties of this day, as if it had not been consecrated to any religious service. But there are many who really improve this occasion in devout and earnest supplication to God: and we doubt not but that more will have been done this day towards the preservation of the kingdom than could have been effected in any other way.]

2. Of what signal use to a nation are the godly and praying few!

[They are often regarded as persons that trouble and endanger the state: but it has been on their account that the nation has not long since been made as Sodom and Gomorrah[o]: and, if the present days of trouble be shortened, it will be for their sake[p]. These are the people who alone have interest with God; and who bring down his blessing on the land. To represent the country as indebted to *them* for its safety and success, is deemed the height of arrogance and folly. But let any one inquire what saved Jerusalem from the Assyrian hosts[q], or, in the instance before us, from the confederate armies? Was it not prayer; prayer chiefly, prayer solely and exclusively? Let atheistical scoffers then deride the idea as they please; but it is a fact, an undeniable fact, that the despised few are the greatest benefactors of their country; and that our hopes in the present contest are founded more on their prayers than on all the efforts of an arm of flesh.]

3. How much may they do for their country, who are ready to think themselves incapable of rendering it any essential service!

[Females and infirm persons may suppose themselves of no use in the present contest. But will not *their* petitions come up with acceptance before God? Shall not the prayer of faith, by whomsoever offered, prevail? Let none then imagine that they cannot benefit their country; but let all unite in weeping and supplication, and "give no rest unto our God, until he arise for our help, and make our Jerusalem a praise in the earth[r]."]

[n] ver. 22—25. [o] Isai. i. 9. [p] Matt. xxiv. 22.
[q] Isai. xxxvii. 21, 22. [r] Isai. lxii. 6, 7.

CCLXXX.

FAITH THE MEANS OF NATIONAL AND PERSONAL PROSPERITY.

2 Chron. xx. 20. *Hear me, O Judah, and ye inhabitants of Jerusalem! Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established; believe his prophets, so shall ye prosper.*

A BELIEF in the providence of God is able to compose the mind under the greatest difficulties. The Scriptures abound with displays of the efficacy of this principle. In this passage before us we are told, that three confederate armies came up against Jehosaphat: yet, while he acknowledged that "he had no might against them," he was enabled by faith to commit his cause to God, and to go forth in triumph, as much as if he had already gained the completest victory. The words of our text are his address to his army when leading them forth to meet the enemy. One would have expected that he would rather have exhorted them to be strong and courageous: but, feeling in himself the blessed influence of faith, he rather exhorted them to the exercise of that divine principle, and assured them that by means of it they should attain success.

It is our intention to shew,

I. What is implied in the faith here recommended—

Doubtless there are many particulars which might be enumerated if it were expedient to enter fully into the nature of faith. But, if we consider to whom, and on what occasion, the address was made, we shall see at once that there were two prominent ideas contained in it, namely,

1. A renunciation of all false confidences—

[This is indispensably necessary to the exercise of faith. God is a jealous God, and "will not give his glory to another." He is rather concerned to defeat, than to prosper, the exertions of those who lean to their own understanding, or trust in an arm of flesh; because they practically deny his agency, and would be encouraged by success to harden themselves in their infidelity[a].

This

[a] See Isai. xxx. 1—3. & xxxi. 1—3.

This self-renunciation is, if possible, still more necessary in relation to the concerns of the soul. If we trust at all in our own wisdom, goodness, or strength, God will consider us as abandoning all hope in him. However good the thing may be which we make even a joint-ground of confidence before him, instead of contributing to our welfare, it will make the Gospel of no effect to us, and Christ will profit us nothing[b].]

2. A simple affiance in God—

[In the instance before us, the people were not to fight, but to stand still and see the interposition of God for them. But *we* are not therefore to neglect the proper means of self-preservation: we must use the means, but not trust in them: God alone must be our trust and our confidence: and we should commit ourselves to him, without doubting either his ability or willingness to help us.

Thus in reference also to our spiritual interests, we should never limit his mercy or his power. His promises should be the ground of our hopes, and the measure of our expectations — — —]

Having endeavoured to ascertain the true nature of faith, let us consider,

II. Its influence on our welfare—

It has a favourable aspect upon,

1. Our national prosperity—

[When a nation is enabled to exercise faith in God, there is good hope that its deliverance is nigh at hand. For faith *conciliates his favour:* he is honoured by it; and he will surely put honour upon it. Faith *engages his protection.* He has promised to be a wall of fire round his people, and as a munition of rocks: and, when they plead his promises, he will not fail in the execution of them. Faith also *calls forth his aid.* He has told us that his eyes run to and fro throughout the whole earth to shew himself strong in the behalf of his people; and he has proved in ten thousand instances how ready and effectual is the succour which he will afford to those who call upon him.]

2. Our personal welfare—

[In allusion to the circumstances of the history before us we may observe, that faith *will secure us victory over all our enemies.* Sin, Satan, death and hell shall all be overcome, if only we believe in Christ: yea, we shall be more than conquerors through him that loved us. Faith also will *enrich us with the most abundant spoils.* Jehosaphat and his army were three days occupied in gathering the spoils, so wonderfully were they enriched

[b] Gal. v. 2, 4.

riched by the very people who had sought only their destruction. And shall not we find ourselves benefited even by the assaults of our enemies? Yes, we shall have deeper discoveries of the love, the power, the faithfulness of our God, and be more amply furnished for our future conflicts. Faith moreover will *bring us to a quiet possession of our inheritance.* Jehosaphat had rest and quiet throughout his realm by means of that exercise of faith. But we shall obtain the undisturbed enjoyment of heaven itself. As soon as faith and patience have had their perfect work, we shall be freed from enemies, and "not a dog shall wag his tongue against us" any more for ever.

Thus prosperous, thus established, shall the weakest be, provided they believe in God, and give implicit credit to his word.]

We would further ADDRESS you on this subject,

1. As members of the community—

[The state has a right to expect of you all the aid which you can afford her under the pressure of her present troubles. Will any of you say, "I am unable to render any effectual assistance?" Pause, before thou repliest in such a way. Can you exercise faith in God? Can you commit her affairs to him? Say not then, "I can do no good:" for whether thou be old or young, male or female, healthful or infirm, thou canst render the most important services. God will hear thy prayer, and respect thy faith. It was not by the sword, but by the simple exercise of faith that three confederate armies were totally destroyed. Fight then with the same weapon: intreat your God to direct the counsels of our governors, and to prosper their endeavours; and we shall yet have fresh evidence, that the injunction in our text was never given or obeyed in vain.]

2. As members of the Church—

[Far be it from us to express indifference respecting good works. We know you must abound in them; and we desire you should abound in them to the glory of God. But they can proceed from nothing but a living principle of faith; and therefore, from a regard to the interests of morality, we repeat the exhortation in the text. It is not by self-righteous, self-confident exertions that you are to become holy, but by exercising faith in Him, who is our "righteousness and our strength." Live then by faith on the Son of God; so shall you derive from him all needful supplies of grace, and progressively advance, both in an enjoyment of his presence and a meetness for his glory.]

CCLXXXI.

THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF JOASH.

2 Chron. xxiv. 2. *And Joash did that which was right in the sight of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest.*

IN order to display more fully his own truth and faithfulness, God often permits events to arise, which seem to render the accomplishment of his promises almost, if not altogether, hopeless. This was particularly visible in his conduct towards the posterity of Abraham in Egypt, in that he forbore to rescue them from their captivity, till the period assigned for their deliverance was brought to the very last hour. We behold a striking interposition also in behalf of the descendants of David, to whom God had promised, that his seed should continue to sit upon the throne of Judah. More than once had they been in imminent danger of utter excision[a], before Athaliah usurped the throne: and she was bent upon destroying them all[b]: but God would not suffer his promise to fail[c]. It should seem that Joash, the youngest son of Ahaziah, was actually with his brethren when they all were slain, and by some means, being only an infant, was hid amongst them, so as to escape the general slaughter. From that state he was rescued by his aunt, and was hid, together with his nurse, in a bed-chamber[d], till he was seven years old: at which time Jehoiada the priest, who had married his aunt, put to death the usurper, and established Joash on his father's throne.

One might have hoped, that a person so signally preserved, should, like Moses, have proved a great blessing to his age and nation: but, hopeful as his beginnings were, his reign was evil, and his end calamitous.

We propose,

I. To take a brief view of his history—

A sudden and total change having taken place in his

[a] Ch. xxi. 4. & xxii. 1.
[b] Ch. xxii. 10.
[c] Ch. xxi. 7.
[d] 2 Kin. xi. 2.

his conduct about the middle of his reign, it will be proper to consider his history,

1. During the life of Jehoiada—

[At first, as might be expected, he was under the entire management of Jehoiada, who was his instructor, and acted towards him as a father[e]. But it was not only during his minority that he was thus observant of Jehoiada, but for many years after he had attained to manhood, even as long as Jehoiada himself lived. Now in this we admire his *humility;* for he was a king, possessed of arbitrary power; and yet, because he was convinced of the skill, the integrity, and the piety of his instructor, he still continued to consult him on all occasions[f] and to follow his advice without reserve. In this conduct also he evinced his *wisdom;* in that he preferred the sage advice of an experienced counsellor, before the less matured dictates of his own mind, or the judgment of sycophants around his throne. Even *piety* itself seems to have possessed his mind at this period: for when he saw to what a dilapidated state the Temple was reduced by the impious rage of Athaliah[f], he set himself to repair it; and even reproved Jehoiada himself, and all the Levites, for their tardiness in executing this important work[g].

Who from such beginnings would not augur well of the remainder of his reign? From such a view of him we are ready to say, 'O that our princes, our nobility, our youth of every rank, were thus observant of pious instructors, thus intent on "doing what was right in the sight of the Lord!"'

But our views of Joash will be greatly changed, if we consider his history.]

2. After Jehoiada's decease—

[Instantly did a mighty change appear in him. Having lost his pious counsellor, he began to listen to the advice of young unprincipled sycophants[h]. O what a misfortune is it to any man to connect himself with ungodly associates! How many are there, who, whilst under the care of pious parents or godly instructors, have promised well, who yet, by means of ungodly companions, have been drawn from every good way, and been led to disappoint all the hopes that have been formed concerning them! We cannot too earnestly caution all against the influence of bad advice, by whomsoever it be given, even though it be by their nearest friends or relatives[i]. Every counsel must be tried by the unerring word of God; and to those who would lead us in opposition to that, our answer must invariably be, "Whether it be right to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye."

Released,

[e] 2 Kin. xii. 1. with 2 Chron. xxiv. 22. [f] ver. 7.
[g] ver. 5, 6. [h] ver. 17. [i] Ch. xxii. 3, 4.

Released, as it were, from the restraints of *man*, he soon cast off all fear of *God*, and abandoned his Temple and service for the service of groves and idols[k]. Nor, when God sent him prophets to testify against his evil ways, would he regard them at all: yea, when Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada, himself was sent to him, instead of attending to his admonitions, he gave commandment to the people to stone him to death; which commandment they executed, even in the court of the Temple itself.

To what excesses will not men run, when once they give ear to ungodly counsellors, and knowingly violate all the dictates of their own conscience! It not unfrequently happens, that backsliders and apostates become the bitterest persecutors; and that they who "*walk in the counsel* of the *ungodly*, soon learn to *stand* in the way of *sinners*, and come at last to *sit* in the seat of the *scornful*[l]."

We wonder not at the melancholy end to which these transgressions brought him. Within the short space of a year was he, notwithstanding "his very great host," subdued by "a small company of Syrians," who destroyed all the princes, his advisers, and sent the spoil of the city and Temple to Damascus[m]: and Joash himself, being seized with multiplied disorders, was assassinated in his bed by two of his own servants[n]. Unhappy man! yet more unhappy still, if we contemplate the fearful state to which he was driven from the presence of his offended God. But such is the end which, if not in this world, certainly in the world to come, awaits those who "leave off to behave themselves wisely," and "turn from the holy commandment delivered to them."]

Let us, from this brief view of his history, proceed,

II. To make some reflections on his character—

From his character *in its commencement*, we observe, *How great is the benefit of a pious education!*

[From what appeared in his latter days, we may judge what he would have been, if he had been left to himself in early life. What pernicious habits would he have contracted, and what multiplied evils would he have perpetrated! Instead of doing for several years "what was right in the sight of the Lord," it is probable that he would have "done evil from his youth." To be restrained from such enormities, was a mercy both to himself and to the whole nation. That he turned this blessing afterwards to a curse, is deeply to be lamented; though the proper tendency of a pious education is not a whit the less apparent. Let all be thankful for the advice given them, and the restraints imposed upon them in early life. Little do any of us know to what an extent of wickedness we might have been carried,

[k] ver. 18. [l] Ps. i. 1. [m] ver. 23, 24. [n] ver. 25.

rled, if those admonitions or corrections, which were once irksome and painful to us, had not been administered. Indeed the more irksome such restraints appear to us, the more reason we have to be thankful for them; since the very impatience which we feel, demonstrates clearly our need of them. An aversion to them argues a disposition that is hateful and ruinous[o]: and those who, from an undue tenderness, neglect to reprove their children, lay up sorrow for themselves, as well as for the objects of their ill-judged lenity[p]. Let parents consider, that they are accountable to God for the authority vested in them, and for the talents committed to their care: and let them remember, that if it is not *always* found that "a child trained in the way he should go will not in a more advanced life depart from it," yet it is *generally* true; and that such a promise affords ample encouragement for their most strenuous exertions.]

From his character *toward the close of life*, we observe, *How awful is the state of those, who, after hopeful beginnings, turn aside from the paths of piety and virtue!*

[In one view, it is a blessing to have been kept from evil for a time; but in another view, the instructions that have been given us, the convictions we have felt, and the obedience we have rendered to the voice of God, will serve but to aggravate the guilt of our subsequent misconduct, and to bring upon us an accumulated weight of misery. As the instructions given by our Lord to the Jews served only to enhance their guilt, and render their state in the future world "less tolerable than that of Sodom and Gomorrah," so all our advantages, professions, and attainments, will, if renounced, make "our latter end worse than our beginning: for it were better never to have known the way of righteousness, than after we have known it to depart from it[q]." Whilst this thought primarily applies to those who, like Joash, have burst through the restraints of education, it speaks powerfully to those who have turned back from a religious course, and relapsed into a state of worldliness and sin. To what they will come at last, God only knows: but the downward road is very precipitous; and they who provoke the Holy Spirit to depart from them, will most probably go on from bad to worse; till, having filled up the measure of their iniquities, they be made distinguished monuments of God's righteous indignation.]

From his whole history in *a collective view*, we observe, *How necessary divine grace is to produce any radical change of heart and life*—

[Education may change the exterior conduct, but the heart will

[o] Prov. xii. 1. & xv. 5, 10, 31, 32. [p] Prov. xxix. 15.
[q] 2 Pet. ii. 20, 21.

will remain the same: and when the restraints that operated at first are removed, the dispositions of the mind will break forth into outward act. The lamp which is not supplied with oil, will go out at last; and, not uncommonly, the restraint which obstructed the stream of nature for a while, will, like a dam broke down, give occasion for the greater and more fatal inundation. Nothing but the grace of God can convert the soul: and every change, short of true conversion, will but deceive us to our eternal ruin. The redeeming love of Christ must be felt in the soul: nothing but that will have a constraining efficacy to renew and sanctify us after the Divine image. Whatever therefore any may have done in compliance with the advice of others, know, that we must have a principle of life within ourselves, and "be renewed in the spirit of our minds," and be "new creatures in Christ Jesus:" "Old things must pass away, and all things become new." Nothing but *this* change will prove effectual for a consistent walk; nor without this can we ever behold the face of God in peace.]

ADDRESS—

1. Those to whom the care of young persons is entrusted—

[Whether you are parents, or instructors only, be not discouraged because you see not all the fruit that you could wish: but continue to sow in hope; for you know not which attempt shall prosper, or when the Angel at Bethesda's pool shall make your labours of love effectual.]

2. Those who are yet under the authority or instruction of others—

[Do not think hardly of the restraints imposed upon you: they are all salutary, and intended for your good; and the day is coming when you will see reason to bless your God for those very things which are now irksome to you. Your advancement in all that is good is the richest recompence your instructors can receive: and, in repaying them, you will greatly enrich yourselves.]

CCLXXXII.

AMAZIAH'S CONFLICT BETWEEN DUTY AND INTEREST.

2 Chron. xxv. 9. *And Amaziah said to the man of God, But what shall we do for the hundred talents which I have given to the army of Israel? And the man of God answered, The Lord is able to give thee much more than this.*

IT

IT is humiliating to reflect, that more attention was often paid to the messengers of the Most High by ungodly men under the Jewish dispensation, than is generally paid to them even by the godly in the present day. At one time we read of a whole army stopped and disbanded by one single declaration of a prophet[a]. At another time, a great national reformation was effected by the very same means[b]. In like manner, when Amaziah king of Judah was going with an army of four hundred thousand men against the Edomites, one word from a man of God prevailed on him to dismiss one fourth of their number, because, as being idolaters, they were under the displeasure of the Most High. He was indeed concerned about the subsidy which he had paid them for their assistance: but that only serves to shew more strongly what implicit obedience he was disposed to pay to the commands of God, when he could so easily be induced to sacrifice his temporal interests, and to release from their obligations so large a portion of his army. The difficulty however which he started, and the solution of that difficulty by the Prophet, deserve particular attention. Let us consider,

I. The difficulty started—

Amaziah had hired one hundred thousand Israelites as auxiliaries in this war, and had paid the money for their equipment; and, when he was required to discharge them, he naturally concluded that he should lose all that he had advanced. Hence he expressed to the Prophet the difficulty that was in his mind. Now,

This is a common difficulty in the minds of men—

[Circumstances of necessity will sometimes arise, where duty and interest appear to clash with each other. Sometimes they actually exist, as in the instance before us; and sometimes they are only apprehended as likely to exist. It sometimes happens that a person has been placed by his parents in a line of business where he cannot get a livelihood without continually violating the laws of the land and the dictates of his conscience. What is to be done in such a case? His property is embarked; and

[a] 1 Kin. xii. 21—24. [b] 2 Chron. xv. 8—15.

and cannot be disposed of without a considerable loss. And shall that be done? Shall such a sacrifice be made to God? It is desirable indeed to maintain a conscience void of offence; but is it to be done at such an expense?

It sometimes happens also that a person is educated for the Ministry, with certain expectation of preferment: but when the time for his ordination arrives, he finds no disposition for the holy employment, no real determination to give himself wholly to the service of the sanctuary. What then shall he do? To go to God with a lie in his right hand, and profess that he is moved by the Holy Ghost to take on himself that sacred function, when he is moved only by the temporal advantages annexed to it, is very painful: and to contract a responsibility for the souls of hundreds and of thousands, when he has scarcely any concern about his own, appears to him a very dangerous step. But what must be done? He has been educated for it: he finds it difficult to turn to any other line: and, above all, the provision designed for him will be lost: and how can these difficulties be surmounted?

When the evils are in prospect only, their operation is exactly the same. One man feels that it is his duty to become a faithful follower of Christ. But his parents will be offended; his friends will be alienated: his prospects in life will be destroyed: and how can he endure to make such sacrifices as these? A few pence he would readily lose; but the loss of so many talents would be ruinous; and he knows not how to combat evils of such magnitude as this.]

But the difficulty referred to would be no difficulty, if only we viewed things in their true light—

[If we should suppose an angel sent down to sojourn for a time on earth, would he find any hesitation whether to prefer his interest or his duty? Nor did the Apostle Paul hesitate even when life itself was at stake: "I am ready," says he, "not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the Lord's sake." Nor should we find any difficulty if we formed a proper estimate of things around us. Should we regard our temporal interests, if we reflected on the extreme emptiness and vanity of every thing here below? Should we hesitate in our choice of evils, if we considered the impossibility of ever being acknowledged by Christ, without forsaking all, even life itself, for him? Above all, would we suffer the whole world to stand in competition with Christ, if we considered what wonderful things he has done and suffered for us? — — — Verily, the loss of all things compared with the loss of his favour, would be only as a feather in a scale against a talent of lead; and, like Paul, we should "count all things but loss, that we might win Christ;" and instead of repining at the injuries sustained, should regard them rather as grounds of mutual

mutual congratulation; saying with St. Paul, "If I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy and rejoice with you all: for the same cause also do ye joy and rejoice with me[c]."]

But we cannot suggest a better view of this matter than that which is contained in our text; in which we have,

II. The difficulty solved—

We are contented that men should lean to the side of interest, if only they will consider wherein their true interest consists. If God cannot do more for them than the world can, let them seek the world; or, if he cannot compensate all that they can lose or suffer for him, let them seek the world. But we fear not to say, whatever be the sacrifice which they make for him, "The Lord is able to give thee much more than this;"

1. In this world—

[It is a certain truth, that God does often recompense the services or sufferings of his people even with worldly prosperity: "Godliness hath in this respect the promise of the life that now is, as well as of that which is to come[d]." This very consideration is urged by God himself as a motive to charity[e]: and our text suggests it as an argument for submitting cheerfully to losses in the path of duty. And it is curious to observe, that the loss sustained by Amaziah in obedience to God's command, was not only recompensed by present victory, but was restored in a threefold proportion to his grandson Jotham; the same sum being paid to him for three successive years by the Ammonites, which Amaziah his grandfather sacrificed to the Lord on this occasion[f]. But it is not three, or thirty fold that *we* are to expect, but "an *hundred-fold*" of whatever we sacrifice for the Lord[g]: and is not this an ample compensation?

It is true, the Israelites whom he dismissed on this occasion did him great injury in their return home[h]: and this might almost seem to contradict the promise in our text: but we apprehend that this very circumstance was permitted by God, on purpose to shew Amaziah how great a ruin he had been delivered from; since these Israelites were not hearty in his cause, and would have turned against him when once they saw the Edomites prevail, and would thus have utterly completed his destruction.

Other

[c] Phil. ii. 17, 18. [d] 1 Tim. iv. 8. [e] Prov. iii. 9, 10.
[f] ver. 11. with Ch. xxvii. 5. [g] Mark x. 29, 30.
[h] ver. 13.

Other reasons might be assigned for this dispensation: it might be supposed to be a punishment on Amaziah for hesitating to obey the divine mandate, and for placing his interest in competition with his duty: or it might be intended to guard him against the idolatry into which he was about to fall, by suffering the most idolatrous part of his own dominions to participate in the judgments inflicted on the Edomites. But we apprehend, that the reason first assigned, is that which was more immediately in the mind of God, when he permitted so dark and mysterious a judgment to fall on one who was obedient to his command, yea to arise, as it were, out of that very obedience.

But, waving all consideration of temporal recompence, God can infinitely more than counter-balance all temporal losses by the richer effusion of his Spirit on the soul. If he suffer us to be deprived of earthly wealth, are we any losers, if he communicate to us a proportionable increase of spiritual riches? Cannot he, by the consolations of his Spirit, raise us far above all temporal distresses, and, by opening a prospect beyond the grave, make us to rejoice and glory in all the sufferings that can be inflicted on us here? Behold the Apostle Paul, how he "took pleasure in infirmities, and reproaches, and necessities, and persecutions, and distresses, for Christ's sake," because they tended to his spiritual welfare[i]: and others, his companions, "took joyfully the spoiling of their goods, knowing that they had in heaven a better and an enduring substance[k]." Thus may we expect it to be with us in this world: "if our afflictions abound, so shall also our consolation abound by Christ;" and the very sense of having sought the glory of God will make every pain a pleasure, and every loss a gain.]

2. In the world to come—

["If we suffer with Christ, we shall also reign with him:" and who can declare the full import of that promise? Truly, the reward that awaits the faithful followers of Christ hereafter, no words can express, no imagination can conceive. It will be in vain to attempt any description of the glory and felicity of heaven: but I will ask, Whether one single plaudit from our Judge will not overbalance all that we can either do or suffer in a hundred years? How indignant shall we be in that day, to think that we permitted the things of time and sense to warp our judgment, or embarrass our practice! One glimpse of the Saviour's glory will repay whole years of trouble: and no sooner shall we be received into his bosom, than we shall adore him for every trial that weaned us from the world, and for every loss that facilitated our progress towards the heavenly kingdom. Let us only take eternity into our estimate, and we shall instantly say with the Apostle, "I reckon (*I compute*) that the sufferings

[i] 2 Cor. xii. 10. [k] Heb. x. 34.

sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us[l]."]

ADDRESS—

1. Those who are yet undecided in the course they shall take—

[Strongly as we have condemned the conduct of Amaziah for hesitating between the calls of interest and of duty, we yet will venture to propose him as an example, *changing only the object of your concern.* Are you tempted to violate a duty, or to draw back from suffering, ask yourselves immediately, 'But what shall I do for the favour of my God? what shall I do for the peace of my conscience? what shall I do for the salvation of my soul? How can I bear the loss of all these?' Let, I say, your hesitation be *on this side:* let the consideration of your *eternal* interests rise in your mind as instinctively and forcibly, as that of *temporal* interests does in the mind of a worldling: and then we shall have no fear but that your obedience to God's word will be prompt, uniform, and unreserved. You will "buy the truth" at *any* price, "and never sell it" for a thousand worlds.]

2. Those who have been enabled to give up all for Christ—

[Whatever you may have lost or suffered, have you ever for a moment repented of the sacrifices you have made? No: if your hearts are right with God, you will feel yourselves indebted to God in proportion to the losses you have sustained for him; seeing that the privilege of suffering for him is an inestimable gift[m], and the highest honour that can be conferred upon a child of man[n]. Go on then, Beloved, "strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might:" and let it be seen in you, that "a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of things that he possesseth," but that "in God's favour is life;" and that, with "his love shed abroad in your heart," "though you have nothing, you are yet possessing all things[o]."]

[l] Rom. viii. 18.
[n] Acts v. 41. 1 Pet. iv. 12—14.
[m] Phil. i. 29.
[o] 2 Cor. vi. 10.

CCLXXXIII.

THE SIN AND DANGER OF DESPISING GOD'S COUNSEL.

2 Chron. xxv. 16. *And it came to pass, as he talked with him, that the king said unto him, Art thou made of the king's counsel? Forbear; why shouldest thou be smitten? Then the prophet forbare, and said, I know that God hath determined to destroy thee, because thou hast done this, and hast not hearkened to my counsel.*

WHEREVER "the heart is not perfect with God," a compliance with the Divine will may be occasional and partial, but it never can be uniform and unreserved: when circumstances occur that require the sacrifice of a bosom lust, the heart will rise against the commandment, and trample under foot the authority of God himself. Herod would comply in some things with the injunctions of John the Baptist, but, when a separation from Herodias was insisted on, he broke through all the restraints of conscience, and inflicted death on his monitor as the penalty of his fidelity. Not unlike to Herod was king Amaziah; who obeyed the voice of a prophet requiring him to dismiss his hired troops, and to rely on God to compensate his loss, but was filled with indignation against one who expostulated with him on the subject of his idolatry. It should seem, that in proportion as a man is degraded in his own eyes by the conduct reproved, he will, if not truly penitent, swell with resentment against the person that undertakes to reprove him. The hiring of troops to augment his army appeared a prudent and commendable measure: but to take for his gods those worthless idols, over whom he himself had prevailed, was folly in the extreme. Hence, when reproved for it, he burst forth into a rage, and quickly terminated his conference with the inspired messenger.

From hence we shall take occasion to shew,

I. What is the conduct of the generality in reference to the counsels of God—

God

God still, as formerly, sends his servants to testify against prevailing iniquities; and still, as heretofore, are his messages rejected. In Amaziah we see a striking picture of rebellious man—

[Nothing could be more just than the reproof given him. To renounce Jehovah, who had interposed so wonderfully in his behalf, and to substitute in his place those idols which had not been able to protect their own votaries, was an infatuation, of which we should scarcely have conceived him capable. Yet behold how he resented the prophet's expostulation! He regarded the admonition as an insult, and as an interference with his royal prerogative; as though God himself was not at liberty to counsel *him*. He moreover menaced the prophet, with an evident reference to Zechariah, whom for a similar offence his father had put to death[a]. Thus he authoritatively silenced the messenger of Heaven; and determinately persisted in his impious idolatry.]

No less reasonable than the expostulations made with him, are those which in God's name we make with you from time to time—

[They principally relate to two points; *Your rejection of God as the supreme good;* and, *your neglect of Christ as the only Mediator between God and man.*

And is there not ground, abundant ground, for remonstrances on these points? Though Jehovah is acknowledged in words as the true God, is he loved, and served, and honoured, *as God?* Do we give him our whole hearts, and "cast all our idols to the moles and to the bats?" Say whether "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life" be not in reality preferred before him, and whether we do not provoke him to jealousy by these, and other "idols which we set up in our hearts?" ——— And though we confess Christ to be the Saviour of the world, say whether we seek him, and rely upon him, and plead his merits at the throne of grace, and renounce with abhorrence all dependence on our own wisdom, strength, or righteousness? Alas! it is manifest, that the regard paid to him amongst us, is by no means what it ought to be, and that all his love to us is repaid for the most part with cold indifference and mere formal acknowledgments ———

We ask then, Whether, as servants of the Most High God, we have not reason to complain, reprove, expostulate? and whether our most earnest representations ought not to be taken in good part?]

Yet is our testimony, like that of the prophet, too often rejected with disdain—

[In

[a] Ch. xxiv. 20, 21.

[In public indeed we are permitted to speak with some degree of plainness: yet even there a faithful discharge of our duty is sure to bring upon us no little measure of odium and reproach. If we exhort, reprove, rebuke, with all authority, as we are commanded to do, many, especially of the higher ranks, will consider themselves as insulted; and will either endeavour to silence us, or, if unable to effect that, will withdraw from a Ministry that is so offensive to them. Their advice to us is like that of the Jews of old; "Prophesy not unto us right things; prophesy unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits; make the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us," or, at least, do not set him before us in his real character[b]. And, when they cannot prevail, they tell us plainly, if not in words, yet more strongly in deed, "As for the word that thou hast spoken unto us in the name of the Lord, we will not hearken unto thee[c]."

And what if we presume to speak to men in private? What indignation do we then excite! If there we should say to them, "I have a message unto thee from the Lord;" and should then proceed to add, in reference to their contempt of God as their chief good, "Wherefore do ye spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which satisfieth not[d]?" and then, in reference to their contempt of Christ as their Saviour, "How shall ye escape, if he neglect so great salvation[e]?" we should soon find whether the spirit of Amaziah does not prevail at this day, as much as ever. It is worthy of observation, that those very persons who will take the most indecent liberties with *us*, decrying to our face all *our* views and conduct as the grossest absurdity, will not suffer us to speak in ever so gentle terms to *them* against *their* views and conduct: and, if we presume to bear a faithful testimony against the iniquities that prevail around us, we are instantly silenced by reproaches, and are cast out as the very pests of society[f].]

That we may be the better able to appreciate such conduct, we now proceed to shew,

II. In what light it is to be viewed—

The world themselves uphold one another in this conduct, as innocent at least, if not also highly laudable: but, wheresoever it is found, it must be regarded,

1. As a symptom of obduracy—

[The prophet needed no other evidence than this to convince him, that Amaziah was a hardened sinner before God. We do not say that every neglect of divine warnings argues the *same*

[b] Isai. xxx. 8—11. [c] Jer. xliv. 16. [d] Isai. lv. 2.
[e] Heb. ii. 3. [f] See Jer. xxix. 24—27.

same degree of obduracy; but, in proportion as such neglect is wilful, deliberate, and persevering, it betrays a spirit of rebellion, and a determined hostility against the God of heaven. And here let us ask ourselves, whether we have not throughout the course of our whole lives set God at defiance, neglecting daily what we knew to be right, and practising habitually what we knew to be contrary to the Divine commands? Let each of us enter into the secret recesses of his own heart, and say, Whether his own will, rather than God's, have not been the determining principle of all his actions, and whether *self* have not been the rule, the measure, and the end even of those things wherein he has professed to serve his God? ——— Verily, if to "tremble at God's word" be that which characterizes the first beginnings of grace in the soul, the state of those who can live so carelessly in a wilful opposition to it must be awful indeed.]

2. As a ground of dereliction—

[God's secret "determination" to withdraw from Amaziah all further communications of his grace, was justly inferred from the measure of obduracy now visible in his conduct. And though we cannot *certainly* dive into the secrets of the Almighty, we may often form a very probable judgment respecting them from what we see with our eyes. We know how God has acted in former times, and how he has told us that he will act: "My people would not hearken to my voice, and Israel would none of me," says he; "so I gave them up unto their own hearts' lust[g]." Repeatedly is the same awful truth declared respecting the heathen world, notwithstanding their sins were far less aggravated than those committed by persons enjoying the light of revelation[h]. What then must *we* expect, who dwell under the meridian light of his Gospel? Have not *we* reason to fear that he will say, "Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone[i]!" Yes, indeed: "His Spirit will not always strive with man[k]:" and if we continue to "rebel and vex his Holy Spirit, he will turn to be our enemy, and fight against us[l]." If once we prevail to quench the motions of his Spirit, our state will be awful beyond all expression[m]: "Woe to them," says God, "when I depart from them[m]!"]

3. As a prelude to destruction—

[Trace the conduct of Amaziah from this moment, and behold his end! He would not listen to the counsels of God, and he is instantly given over to other counsellors[n]. He sends a challenge to the king of Israel, who dissuades him from entering into an unnecessary and destructive war. The parable used on this occasion intimated to him his insufficiency to cope with Israel, and the certain issue of so unequal a contest[o]: but "he

[g] Ps. lxxxi. 11, 12. [h] Rom. i. 24, 26, 28. [i] Hos. iv. 17.
[k] Gen. vi. 3. [l] Isai. lxiii. 10. [m] Hos. ix. 12.
[n] ver. 17. [o] ver. 18, 19.

"he would not hear; for IT CAME OF GOD, that he might deliver them into the hand of their enemies, *because they sought after the gods of Edom*[p]." To battle he went, and was defeated, and taken; and his capital became an easy prey to the conqueror, who plundered it of all its wealth, and broke down a portion of the wall which had been erected for its defence[q]. From that time he lost all the affection and confidence of his subjects, who at last conspired against him; and, when he "had fled to Lachish for safety, sent after him and slew him there." The whole of this is traced to God as its author, *on account of his impious rejection of the Divine counsels*[r].

And what may not be expected by us also, if we "reject the counsel of God against ourselves?" Surely we shall be left to follow the infatuated devices of others, or of our own hearts, till we bring upon ourselves the destruction we have merited. Hear, how awfully this is declared by God himself: "If we receive not the love of the truth that we may be saved, God will send us a strong delusion, that we may believe a lie, and finally be damned, because we believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness[s]." And by us is this sentence more especially to be expected, because of the *many* and *faithful* warnings which we have despised; for "he that, being often reproved, hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy[t]." The gathering of clouds does not more certainly portend rain, than a contempt of God's messages gives reason to expect his everlasting displeasure.]

LEARN then,

1. In what manner we should attend the ordinances of religion—

[We should "be doers of the word, and not hearers only, if we would not deceive our own souls[u]" ———]

2. What obligations we owe to God for his long-suffering towards us—

[Long has "he stood at the door of our hearts, knocking[x]," and has been refused admission[y] ——— O let us bless his name, that he has not yet given us over to judicial blindness, and final impenitence[z]. Still has our Great Advocate, the Lord Jesus Christ, interceded for us[a]; and still does our "God wait to be gracious unto us." O that "to-day, while it is called to-day, we might hear the voice" that yet soundeth in our ears, and that "the long-suffering of our God might lead us to repentance[b]!"]

[p] ver. 20.
[q] ver. 21—24.
[r] ver. 27.
[s] 2 Thess. ii. 10—12.
[t] Prov. xxix. 1.
[u] Jam. i. 21—24.
[x] Rev. iii. 20.
[y] Cant. v. 2, 3.
[z] Acts xxviii. 25—27.
[a] Luke xiii. 6—9.
[b] Rom. ii. 4.

CCLXXXIV.

CONNEXION BETWEEN DILIGENCE AND PROSPERITY.

2 Chron. xxvi. 5. *As long as he sought the Lord, God made him to prosper.*

THE dispensation under which the Jews lived being of a temporal nature, their advancement in respect of temporal prosperity was, for the most part, proportioned to the regard which they, and their Rulers, shewed to God. The account given of Uzziah may serve almost as a general history of God's conduct towards them[a]: when he walked humbly before God, "he was marvellously helped till he was strong[b]:" but when, by his pride and disobedience, he had provoked God's heavy displeasure, he was given over to "destruction." The dispensation under which we live is altogether spiritual; and God observes the same rule of procedure towards us in spiritual things, as he maintained towards them in temporal things.

Respecting the prosperity of our souls the text calls us to notice two things;

I. Its dependence on God—

[However diligent Uzziah was in seeking the Lord, it was God, and God alone, that "*made him* to prosper." And whatever means we may use, our advancement in the divine life must be traced to the same source. Our first inclinations to good originate with him. The continuance and increase of holy dispositions is in like manner the effect of his grace. If he were for one moment to suspend his communications, we should be as incapable of bearing fruit to his glory, as a branch is when severed from the tree. Let it only be inquired wherein prosperity of soul consists[bb]; and it will immediately appear, that he must be the author of it in all its parts — — —]

II. Its connexion with our diligence—

[The fruits of the earth are given us by God; yet he bestows his bounties on those only who use the proper means for the attainment of them. So does he also require exertion on our

[a] Lev. xxvi. 3—45. [b] ver. 8, 15.

[bb] A subjugation of our passions; a victory over the world; an abiding sense and enjoyment of the Divine presence.

our part in order to our spiritual advancement. The means are inseparably connected with the end: they are connected *in God's decree*[c]—*in the very nature of things*—and *in the experience of all the saints*; and the more diligently we use the means, the more will both "grace and peace be multiplied unto us."]

From this subject we may derive matter,

1. For reproof—

[How awfully does this reprove *the careless sinner!* for if all our prosperity of soul be inseparably connected with diligence in the ways of God, it is obvious that they who neglect the word of God and prayer must be in a perishing condition. *The backslider* too must feel himself condemned by the fact recorded in the text. It is plainly intimated that Uzziah, through his remissness, experienced a sad reverse. And such a reverse will all experience who relax their diligence in the ways of God. Let us watch therefore against secret declensions: and, if we have already declined, let us "repent, and do our first works[d]," and "strengthen, by exertion, the dying remnants" of grace within us[e].]

2. For encouragement—

[We cannot command success, either in temporal or spiritual pursuits; yet in both it is found true, that "the diligent hand maketh rich." In some instances indeed God is found of them that sought him not; and persons may use the means of grace without receiving any sensible increase of grace or peace. Nevertheless this is not God's usual mode of proceeding; nor does he ever continue either to bless the indolent, or to withhold his blessing from the diligent. He never will suffer any to seek his face in vain[f]. Let this then encourage all to persevere in the use of means, "knowing assuredly that their labour shall not be in vain in the Lord."]

[c] Ezek. xxxvi. 37. Matt. vii. 7, 8.
[d] Rev. ii. 4, 5.
[e] Rev. iii. 2.
[f] Isai. xlv. 19.

CCLXXXV.

THE BAD EFFECTS OF PROSPERITY.

2 Chron. xxvi. 15, 16. *He was marvellously helped, till he was strong: but when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction.*

IT not unfrequently happens, that, after the most promising appearances of abundance, the hopes of the harvestman are disappointed: some blast, or some

some destructive insect cuts off the fruits ere they arrive at maturity, so that "the mower fills not his arms with them, neither he that bindeth up the sheaves his bosom." Thus also it is too often found in the moral and religious world: persons begin to "run well, and continue for a season; but are at last hindered," and "come short of that rest" which they had professed to seek. This is particularly found in those whose hopeful conduct has been chiefly occasioned by external influence. We have seen in Joash, that "he did that which was right all the days of Jehoiada the priest;" but after his decease, he turned aside to wickedness, and brought the heavy judgments of God both on himself and all his people[a]. Thus it was also with his grandson, Uzziah. For many years "he sought after God[b];" and was very signally blessed, and prospered of the Lord during all that time: yet, through the influence of that very prosperity, he fell, and perished miserably under the hand of an avenging God.

The words of our text will naturally lead us to set before you,

I. The proper tendency of prosperity—

Doubtless, prosperity cheers the mind; but its proper tendency is,

1. To puff up with pride—

[It is difficult to succeed in any enterprize or any labour, without arrogating to ourselves a considerable portion of credit on account of it: "We sacrifice to our own net, and burn incense to our own drag[c]" ——— That this is the common influence of prosperity, appears from the cautions given to the Israelites respecting it, in an instance where it should seem to be impossible for them to do otherwise than give the whole honour to God[d]. But pride, though so unsuitable to a fallen creature, is, alas! too powerful a principle in every child of man. Behold Nebuchadnezzar in the summit of his glory[e] ——— or Uzziah, when he had been "marvellously helped, till he was strong:" how forgetful were they of the obligations which they owed to God! Even the pious Hezekiah fell, through the influence

[a] Ch. xxiv. 2, 17, 18. [b] ver. 5. [c] Hab. i. 16.
[d] Deut. viii. 11—14. [e] Dan. iv. 30—32. & v. 20.

fluence of pride, though afterwards he humbled himself for this transgression. Indeed it is very rare that persons elevated by the acquisition of wealth or honour retain their former simplicity: they rise in their own esteem, in proportion as they are looked up to by others, and account the homage that is paid to them a tribute due to their superior worth.]

2. To harden in iniquity—

[It is not towards men only that prosperity affects our conduct, but even towards God himself. We can scarcely attain any considerable advancement in the world, but presently we become "presumptuous, and self-willed:" we allow ourselves a greater latitude to follow the inclinations of our own hearts: and, if checked by any faithful monitor, we will not endure his expostulations or reproofs; but, like Uzziah, are "wroth with him" for performing his duty, instead of being grieved at ourselves for transgressing our own. We think ourselves at liberty to act as we please; and that neither God nor man has any right to call us to account. This is most justly depicted by the Psalmist[f]——— and is traced by him to prosperity, as its proper source[g]——— Ah! how many such instances have we seen, of men once apparently modest and humble, but afterwards, like "Jeshurun, waxing fat and kicking, and forsaking the God that made them, and lightly esteeming the rock of their salvation[h]!" We are apt to envy such persons, when we behold their prosperity: but we shall see little reason to do so, if we duly consider the effects produced by it on their minds[hh].]

Rarely indeed has any spiritual good arisen from prosperity: but how awful is it to reflect on,

II. Its frequent termination—

Behold how it terminated in the case before us!

[Uzziah, not content with the pomp of royalty, would usurp also the priestly office: and, when reproved for his presumption, was filled with indignation against his reprovers. But "*whilst he was wroth with the priests*, the leprosy rose up in his forehead[i]:" and immediately "they thrust him out of the temple; yea, himself also hasted to go out, because the Lord had smitten him[k]." Thus is it with many who "once made a fair shew in the flesh;" "being lifted up with pride, they fall into the condemnation of the devil[l]." From their scenes of earthly happiness they are cast headlong into the lowest abyss of misery, like the rich man in the parable, whose surviving brethren, misled by his example, were following him thither with hasty strides[m]. But, if

[f] Ps. x. 4—6, 11, 13.
[g] Ps lxxiii. 3—9, 11, 12.
[h] Deut. xxxii. 15.
[hh] Ps. lxxiii. 3, 16—19.
[i] ver. 19.
[k] ver. 20.
[l] 1 Tim. iii. 6.
[m] Luke xvi. 22, 23, 27, 28.

if we could conceive by any means that such an one had found his way into heaven, the very transaction that took place in the Temple would be renewed there; the inhabitants of those blessed mansions, indignant at his presumption, would instantly "*thrust him out*[n];" yea, "he himself would haste to go out," not being able to endure the countenance of his offended God[o]. Let it not be thought that this is an uncommon termination of prosperity: for both Scripture and observation teach us to regard it as its frequent and ordinary result[p].]

Let us LEARN then from hence,

1. To be moderate in our desire after earthly things—

[We may desire prosperity, because it is a gift of God to men[q]; and is particularly promised to those who love him[r]. But we should desire it only in submission to the will of God. We know not what will be its ultimate effect upon our souls. We know not what advantage it will give to our corrupt nature to break forth, and to plunge us into everlasting misery. Let us be diligent in our earthly calling, whatever it may be; but, as to any anxious concern about it, "let our moderation be known unto all men[s]." "Our affections must not be set on things below, but on those which are above, where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God."]

2. To be patient and resigned under any trials that may come upon us—

[Trials are "not at the present joyous, but grievous;" but they are promised by God as the choicest fruit of his paternal love[t]. Even Paul himself needed a thorn in his flesh, "lest he should be exalted above measure[u]." Who then are we, that we should think trials unnecessary for us? They are the furnace, that is to purify us from our dross[x], or the pruning-knife, that is to render us more fruitful in good works[y]. We know how profitable it was to Manasseh to be taken among the thorns[z]; and we have reason to hope that our afflictions also shall be sanctified to our good[a], and that we shall at the close of them adopt the language of David, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted[b]."]

3. To be thankful for the high honour conferred upon us—

[To

[n] Luke xiii. 28.
[o] Isai. xxxiii. 14. Compare the three verses following.
[p] Prov. i. 32. with Matt. xix. 23—26.
[q] ver. 5.
[r] Ps. i. 3. & cxxii. 6.
[s] Phil. iv. 5.
[t] Heb. xii. 6—8.
[u] 2 Cor. xii. 7.
[x] Isai. xxvii. 9.
[y] John xv. 2.
[z] 2 Chron. xxxiii. 11, 12.
[a] Heb. xii. 10.
[b] Ps. cxix. 71.

[To none of the Jewish kings was given the united honour of royalty and priesthood: that was reserved for Christ alone, who was to be "a Priest upon his throne[c]:" who yet, though a king, "glorified not himself to be made a High Priest, but was called to it of God, as was Aaron[d]." But that honour has our adorable Saviour procured for us: "He has loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and has made us kings and priests unto our God for ever and ever[e]." Yes, we are "a royal priesthood[f];" and "by the new and living way which he has opened for us through the veil, we may draw nigh" even to the very throne of God himself[g]: and our doing so in faith will rid us from the leprosy, instead of bringing the leprosy upon us; and, instead of arming the angels against us, will make them to rejoice[h]. Let us then improve our liberty, and "offer up spiritual sacrifices to our God from day to day, assured, that they are acceptable to him through Jesus Christ[i]."]

[c] Zech. vi. 13. [d] Heb. v. 5. [e] Rev. i. 5, 6.
[f] 1 Pet. ii. 9. [g] Heb. x. 19—22.
[h] Luke xv. 10. & xvi. 22. [i] 1 Pet. ii. 5.

CCLXXXVI.

A SENSE OF SINFULNESS A GOOD CORRECTIVE OF EVIL PASSIONS.

2 Chron. xxviii. 10. *Are there not with you, even with you, sins against the Lord your God?*

IN viewing the various dispensations of Providence, we should regard the Supreme Disposer of all events not merely as a mighty Sovereign ordering every thing according to his own will, but rather as a moral Governor, who has respect to the welfare of his creatures, and consults the best interests of the universe. Towards individuals indeed his dealings may not accord with our ideas of retributive justice, because there is another world wherein the seeming inequalities of his present conduct towards them will all be rectified: but towards nations, as this is the only time when they can be dealt with in their national capacity, he conducts himself more visibly according to their moral habits, rewarding them when they walk agreeably to his will, and punishing them when their violations of his commands are general

general and flagrant. We must not however imagine, that the persons whom he makes use of as instruments of his displeasure, are more righteous than those whom he sends them to correct; for he may, and does, use what instruments he pleases: but the persons corrected, will always be found to have brought upon themselves his judgments by their own wilful and obstinate impiety. This is a truth so obvious and incontrovertible, that even idolaters themselves receive it with the greatest facility, and are sometimes influenced by it to a great extent. The Israelites, at the time that the prophet Oded was sent to them, were sunk in the grossest idolatry; yet, when informed by him that their victory over Judah was the result of a Divine appointment on account of Judah's sins, and that the excessive cruelty with which that victory had been accompanied would bring the Divine displeasure upon them also, they instantly sacrificed both their interests and their resentments, and yielded obedience to the Prophet's admonitions. The expostulation in our text came home with power to their consciences; "Are there not with you, even with you, sins against the Lord your God?" May we also feel its force, whilst we,

I. Urge you to institute the proposed inquiry—

The circumstances under which this inquiry was proposed naturally lead us to consider it,

1. In reference to the nation at large—

[Doubtless there are great enormities in other lands: the grossest superstitions and the most flagrant impieties testify against the great majority of those who bear the Christian name. But whilst we of this land boast of our superior light and morals, what abominations are found amongst us! Let us not think that because the evils once perpetrated in the Slave-trade have been in a measure suppressed, the blood of thousands and tens of thousands does not yet cry to God against us for our insatiable avarice, and our cruel injustice. For centuries yet to come, we need bewail the guilt that has been contracted by our impious traffic in human blood. Besides, the light with which we have been favoured beyond other nations, only renders our misimprovement of it the more criminal: for though certainly there are many in the land who highly value and adorn the Gospel, there

there is with the generality a neglect and contempt of serious religion; so that real piety is branded with infamy amongst us, more than infidelity or ungodliness itself. Truly, on a view of all ranks and orders amongst us, we have as much reason to be ashamed and confounded before God, as any who may have experienced his heaviest judgments.]

2. In reference to ourselves in particular—

[We are all ready enough to mark what is amiss in others, and even to ascribe the calamities of others to the intervention of an offended Providence. But it would be well for all to search out and examine their own faults, rather than to be uncharitably condemning the faults of others. The self-righteous, self-applauding moralist can spy out the failing and infirmities of those who profess a stricter system of religion: but let me ask such an one, Are there not in thee, even in thee, sins against the Lord thy God? Hast thou not a beam in thine own eye, whilst thou art noticing with such severity the mote in thy brother's eye? Look and see whether thy religion of which thou thinkest so highly be not a mere form of godliness without the power of it? See whether the Bible be dearer to thee than gold and silver, and be relished by thee more than thy necessary food? See whether thy heart be broken and contrite before God, so that thou often weepest before God on account of the sins thou hast committed against him? See whether Christ be precious in thy sight, so that all thy hope, all thy desire, all thy delight are centered in him alone? In a word, see whether all thy faculties and powers are consecrated to the service of Him who lived and died for thee? Verily, if thou wouldest consult the records of thy conscience in relation to these things, thou wouldest see little reason, and feel little inclination too, to cast stones at others.

On the other hand, professors of religion also are but too often guilty of this same fault, being filled with an overweening conceit of their own excellencies, and a contemptuous disregard of their less spiritual neighbours. But I would ask the professed follower of Christ, Are there not sins with thee too, as well as with the Pharisaic formalist? Are there not great and crying evils in the religious world, which prove a stumbling-block to those around them? Are not a vain conceit, an obtrusive talkativeness, an inattention to relative duties, and a disregard of just authority, often indulged under the cloke of religion? Are there not often found amongst professors of religion the same covetous desires, the same fraudulent practices, the same deviations from truth and honour, as are found in persons who make no profession? Are there not many whose tempers are so unsubdued, that they make their whole families a scene of contention and misery? Yes; though the accusations which are brought against the whole body of religious people as hypocrites are a gross calumny, there is but too much ground for them in the conduct of many.]

But

But where these observations do not at all apply, we must still renew the question, even to the most exemplary amongst us, "Are there not sins with thee also," even such as would justify God in taking vengeance upon thee? Think of thy manifold short-comings and defects; yea, think of "the iniquity even of thy holiest things;" and, instead of exalting thyself above others, thou wilt call thyself "less than the least of all saints," or rather "the chief of sinners."]

But, that the inquiry may be suitably improved, we will,

II. Point out the ends for which it should be made—

There is not any part of Christian experience which would not be deeply affected by the knowledge of our own hearts: but, as our observations on this subject must of necessity be few, we shall confine ourselves to those which arise from the passage under our consideration.

We should inquire then into our own sins,

1. To make us estimate aright the distinguished mercies vouchsafed unto us—

[Let us reflect on the peaceful state of this nation during the whole period in which we have been engaged in war, whilst every nation in Europe has in its turn sustained the heaviest calamities*; and how shall we adore that Providence that has protected *us!*

Let us contemplate also the numbers who have from time to time been cut off in their sins, though they had neither attained to our age, nor committed our iniquities: O what reason have we to adore the mercy that has spared *us*, and that still waits to be gracious to us! May we not well be astonished, that whilst so many have been taken, *we* are left; and that whilst *they* are gone beyond redemption, *we* are yet on praying ground? If we know little of ourselves, we shall feel but little gratitude for this mercy: but, if we are duly sensible of our own extreme vileness, we shall be overwhelmed with a view of his goodness to us, and shall sink, as it were, under a sense of our unbounded obligations.]

2. To moderate our resentments to our offending brethren—

[The former idea was *implied* in the Prophet's address to Israel; but this was plainly *expressed*. The cruelty exercised by them

* March 1814, when the North of Germany was so desolated and distressed.

them was extreme: and, to deter them from prosecuting their inhuman projects, was this suggestion made: for how could they proceed with such rigour towards others, when they who deserved so much heavier judgments had experienced such lenity from the hands of God?

Certain it is, that we feel keenly for the most part the injuries that are done to us; and that we are but too apt to indulge a vindictive spirit. But the evils that a fellow-creature can do to us are nothing in comparison of those which we ourselves have committed against God: how then can we proceed with severity against a fellow-servant for a few pence, when a debt of ten thousand talents has been remitted unto us? Surely we shall be afraid lest God should mete to us the measure which we have dealt out to others, and that, "having shewn no mercy to others, we should have judgment without mercy ourselves[b]."]

3. To stir us up to imitate the compassion of our God—

[What a marvellous exercise of compassion was that which arose from the Prophet's admonition! The princes of the congregation were led to protest against the measures now about to be adopted by the victorious army; and that army, with the spoils and captives in their hands, renounced immediately all their views of interest and resentment, and made use of the very spoils, whereby they had expected to be enriched, to feed the hungry, and clothe the naked, and comfort the distressed, and honour those whom they had so deeply degraded[c]: they even put on asses the sick and feeble; and themselves took them back to the borders of their own country. This was what they now saw to have been the conduct of God towards them, and they desired to tread in his steps.

And what has God done for us? Even when we were enemies, he gave his only dear Son to die for us: yea, and notwithstanding all our continued impieties, he stretches out his hands to us all the day long, and importunes us to accept his proffered salvation. Thus, if we know how contrary to our deserts these mercies are, we shall be ready to act towards our brethren: instead of rendering evil for evil, we shall "feed our enemy, or give him drink," in hopes of melting him into love by heaping kindness upon him, just as the workman fuses his metals by an accumulation of fire upon them[d]: he will not "be overcome of evil, but will overcome evil with good[e]."]

Let

[b] Jam. ii. 13. [c] "Anointing them."

[d] Rom. xii. 14, 17, 19, 20. There is in this last verse an astonishing beauty in the word ψώμιζε, which imports the feeding him as a helpless infant; and corresponds exactly with the tender and respectful care exercised by the Israelites on this occasion. Ver. 15.

[e] Rom. xii. 21.

Let this subject TEACH US,

1. To cultivate the knowledge of our own hearts—

[It is that, and that alone, which will bring us to act aright in any part of our duty. Without a sense of sin we can never be humbled before God; and without humility we can never exercise a just measure of forbearance and of kindness to man. Then only, when we are sensible of having "been forgiven much, shall we love much."]

2. To keep our minds open to conviction—

[It is surprising how soon this whole multitude was convinced of sin. Let us learn from them not to dispute with our reprovers, or to vindicate ourselves at the expense of truth: let us rather desire to find out our errors, that they may be rectified, than to cloke them, and hold them fast.]

3. To follow instantly the convictions of our own minds—

[The Israelites fulfilled to the uttermost what they apprehended to be the mind and will of God: they did not plead for their interest, on the one hand, nor were they deterred by a fear of shame, on the other: they saw their duty, and performed it instantly without reserve. O that our reproofs might thus meet always an obedient ear! This ready obedience was their highest honour: let us regard it as ours also: and let us beware, lest this host of benevolent idolaters rise up in judgment against us, to our utter confusion, and our eternal condemnation.]

CCLXXXVII.

THE CONDUCT OF AHAZ IN HIS DISTRESS.

2 Chron. xxviii. 22. *In the time of his distress did he trespass yet more against the Lord: this is that king Ahaz.*

IT is a common sentiment with men in health, that they will repent and turn to God in a time of sickness: they imagine that trouble will of course dispose their minds for the exercises of religion, and that they may therefore safely postpone all serious attention to their eternal interests, till that hour shall arrive. But there is no necessary connexion between affliction and true piety: "the sorrow of the world worketh death;" and consequently must rather be adverse to, than productive of, godly sorrow,

sorrow, which alone worketh repentance to salvation, not to be repented of[a]." If indeed trouble be accompanied with the grace of God, it then operates like the plowing up of fallow ground for the reception of the seed: but of itself it only hardens the heart against God, and calls forth into activity the most malignant passions of the soul. This cannot be more strikingly illustrated than in the conduct of Ahaz; in speaking of which we shall notice,

I. The evil imputed to him—

This was doubtless exceeding great. Ahaz having provoked God by his great and multiplied iniquities, was given up by God into the hands of the Edomites first, and then of the Philistines, as the just punishment of his sins. The Assyrians too, whom he had hired as his allies, eventually, "instead of strengthening him, helped forward his distress[b]."

And what was the effect of these troubles on his mind? Did he humble himself before his God, and implore mercy at his hands? No; but renounced his God altogether, setting up the gods of Syria in opposition to him, and shutting up the doors of his temple, and destroying the vessels that had been consecrated to his service, and building altars in every corner of Jerusalem, and, in every city of Judah, making high places, to burn incense unto other gods[c].

We must confess that such impiety far exceeds what is commonly found in the world at this day; but in lower degrees it is found to obtain amongst us also. All of us have a measure of trouble inflicted on us by God on account of sin; and in a variety of ways have we misimproved the divine chastisements. The very evil imputed to Ahaz of trespassing yet more in his distress, may be committed by us in our troubles,

1. By indifference—

[Nothing is more common than to overlook the hand of God

[a] 2 Cor. vii. 10. [b] ver. 16—20. [c] ver. 23—25.

God in our trials, ascribing them either to chance, or to second causes only, and regarding them as merely the usual events of life. In such a state of mind we meet them with a kind of stoical apathy; making the best of existing circumstances, and trying, by the expedients of pleasure, business, company, or occupation of some kind, to divert our thoughts, and alleviate our pains[cc]. This is, as the Scripture expresses it, to "*despise* the chastening of the Lord[d]." And how offensive must such conduct be! When HE speaks, and we will not hear[e]; when HIS hand is lifted up, and we will not see it[f]; what is this but, in effect, to say, "The Lord doth neither good nor evil[g]!" This indifference is well described by the prophet, in relation to Israel of old: "It (God's anger) hath set him on fire round about, yet he knew it not; and it burned him, yet he laid it not to heart[h]." But, however such conduct may be countenanced by an ungodly world, it will surely be visited with God's heavy displeasure[i].]

2. By obstinacy—

[Some, whilst they are not altogether unconscious from whence their afflictions proceed, are yet determined to go on in their own way: "they refuse to receive correction, and make their faces harder than a rock, and refuse to return to God[k]." Thus it was with the Jews of old; "The people turneth not unto him that smiteth him; neither do they seek the Lord of Hosts[l]. And on this ground it was that the prophet uttered that heavy complaint against them; "Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evil-doers! Why should ye be stricken any more? ye will revolt more and more[m]." Happy would it be if this rebellious spirit had been confined to them: but it is no less prevalent amongst us: there are many for whose reformation successive strokes have proved ineffectual; and who are yet as far from God as if no such means had ever been used to bring them to repentance: yea, like Pharaoh, they seem only to have been hardened by the plagues inflicted on them. The Lord grant that they may see their error, ere they be given over to judicial blindness and final impenitence!]

3. By murmuring—

[How often do we hear people complaining of their lot, as if their sufferings were intolerable and undeserved! However clearly God marks their sin in their punishment, they reflect not on themselves as the sinful causes of their misery, but on him as the severe and unprovoked author of them[n]. Thus Isaiah, foretelling the effect of God's chastisements on the Jews, says,

[cc] Isai. xxii. 12, 13. [d] Prov. iii. 11. [e] Job xxxiii. 14.
[f] Isai. xxvi. 11. [g] Zeph. i. 12. [h] Isai. xlii. 25.
[i] Ps. xxviii. 5. [k] Jer. v. 3. Isai. lvii. 17.
[l] Isai. ix. 13. [m] Isai. i. 4, 5.
[n] Exod. xvi. 35, 41. Ezek. xviii. 25, 29.

says, "They shall pass through the land hardly bestead and hungry: and it shall come to pass, that, when they shall be hungry, they shall fret themselves, and curse their God and their king[o]." And what shall we say of such a disposition? what shall we say of him who by "his own foolishness perverteth his way, and then in heart fretteth against the Lord[p]?" This we must say, that they manifest the very dispositions of hell itself: for of the unhappy spirits that are there confined, we are told, that "they gnaw their tongues for pain, and blaspheme the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and they repent not of their deeds[q]."]

4. By despondency—

[As on the one hand we are apt to "*despise* the chastening of the Lord," so, on the other hand, we are ready to "*faint* when we are rebuked of him[r]." We have no idea of chastisements proceeding from love; and, beholding nothing but wrath in them, we conclude, that it is in vain to call upon God, and that he will never be intreated of us. Thus even from despondency we derive arguments for continuance in sin: "There is no hope: no; for I have loved strangers, and after them will I go[s]." Of this God himself complains[t]; and well he may, since it is a limiting of his power, as though he were not able to deliver[u]; or a denial of his mercy, as though he had "forgotten to be gracious, and his mercy were clean gone for ever[x]." True it is, that despondency is often indulged under an idea that it is an expression of humility: but it is as offensive to God as any of the dispositions before specified, and tends, even more strongly than any of them, to bind our sins upon us.]

That we may be the more afraid of following the steps of Ahaz, let us consider,

II. The stigma fixed upon him—

There is an extraordinary force and emphasis in the expression, "This is that king Ahaz"—

[It is as though God intended to point him out to the whole world as a prodigy of folly and wickedness: this is that *infatuated* man, who presumes to "strive with his Maker, like the clay quarrelling with the potter[y]," or "briers and thorns setting themselves in battle array against the devouring fire[z]." This is that *ungrateful* man, who, when I have been chastening him with parental tenderness in order to prevent the necessity of executing my everlasting judgments upon him, has only multiplied his transgressions against me; breaking through every hedge

[o] Isai. viii. 21. [p] Prov. xix. 3. [q] Rev. xvi. 9—11.
[r] Heb. xii. 5. [s] Jer. ii. 25. [t] Jer. xviii. 12, 13.
[u] Isai. l. 2. [x] Ps. lxxvii. 7—9. [y] Isai. xlv. 9.
[z] Isai. xxvii. 4.

hedge which I made to restrain him, and throwing down every wall which I erected to impede his course[a]. This is that *impious* man, who, in the madness of his heart, has determined to banish me from the world, and to blot out the remembrance of me from the earth.]

As the expression is emphatical with respect to him, so it is most instructive with respect to us—

[It clearly shews us *that "sin is a reproach to any people*[b]." We may vindicate it, and applaud it; but we only "glory in *our shame*[c]:" for it makes a man as lothesome "as a sepulchre that is full of all uncleanness[d]." Sin is fitly characterized as "filthiness of the flesh and spirit[e]:" and in that light it is viewed, not by God only, but by all who are taught of God. Examine the forementioned sins, of indifference, of obstinacy, of murmuring, and despondency, and they will all be found odious in the extreme; so that a man under the dominion of them may well be pointed out as an object of universal abhorrence: "This is that king Ahaz[ee]." It is possible indeed that an ungodly man may pass through life without any such stigma fixed upon him: but he will not escape it in the last day, when all the most secret sins shall be revealed: then will that declaration of Solomon be fully verified, "The wicked man is lothesome, and cometh to shame[f]:" however cautiously he may have veiled his wickedness from the eyes of men, or even obtained the applause of man for his pretended virtues, he will "awake to shame and everlasting contempt[g]."]

From this subject we may LEARN,

1. The great design of God in our troubles—

[God does not willingly afflict the children of men. He is a tender Parent, who seeks the welfare of his children, and "chastens them for their profit," to humble them, and to prove them, and to make them "partakers of his holiness[h]." Hence it is said, "Blessed is the man whom thou chastenest, O Lord[i]." Let us then contemplate our trials in this view. From whatever quarter they may come, let us acknowledge the hand of God in them; and bless his name, as well when he takes away, as when he gives[k].]

2. Our duty under them—

[Every rod has a voice to us, which we should endeavour to understand[l]: and, if we cannot immediately discern its true import,

[a] Hos. ii. 6. [b] Prov. xiv. 34. [c] Phil. iii. 19.
[d] Matt. xxiii. 27. [e] 2 Cor. vii. 1. [ee] Ps. lii. 7.
[f] Prov. xiii. 5. [g] Dan. xii. 2.
[h] Isai. xxvii. 9. Heb. xii. 10. [i] Ps. xciv. 10.
[k] Job i. 21. [l] Mic. vi. 9.

port, we should go to God, and say, "Shew me wherefore thou contendest with me[m]." And, when we have found out "the accursed thing that troubleth our camp[n]," then we should "humble ourselves under the mighty hand of our God[o]," and with meek submission say, "I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him[p]." We should even be thankful for the fire that purgeth away our dross, and not so much as wish to be delivered from it till we can come out of it purified as gold.]

[m] Job x. 2. [n] Josh. vii. 11.
[o] Jam. iv. 10. [p] Mic. vii. 9.

CCLXXXVIII.

RESTORATION OF THE TEMPLE WORSHIP BY HEZEKIAH.

2 Chron. xxix. 20—29. *Then Hezekiah the king rose early, and gathered the rulers of the city, and went up to the house of the Lord. And they brought seven bullocks, and seven rams, and seven lambs, and seven he-goats, for a sin-offering for the kingdom, and for the sanctuary, and for Judah: and he commanded the priests, the sons of Aaron, to offer them on the altar of the Lord. So they killed the bullocks, and the priests received the blood, and sprinkled it on the altar: likewise, when they had killed the rams, they sprinkled the blood upon the altar: they killed also the lambs, and they sprinkled the blood upon the altar. And they brought forth the he-goats for the sin-offering before the king and the congregation; and they laid their hands upon them: and the priests killed them, and they made reconciliation with their blood upon the altar, to make an atonement for all Israel: for the king commanded that the burnt-offering and the sin-offering should be made for all Israel. And he set the Levites in the house of the Lord, with cymbals, with psalteries, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, and of Gad the king's seer, and Nathan the prophet: for so was the commandment of the Lord by his prophets. And the Levites stood with the instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets. And Hezekiah commanded to offer the burnt-offering upon the altar. And when the burnt-offering began, the song of the Lord began also with the trumpets and with the instruments ordained by David king of Israel. And all the congregation worshipped, and the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded: and all this continued until the burnt-offering was finished. And when they had made an end of offering, the king and all that were present with him bowed themselves and worshipped.*

AMONGST

AMONGST the most eminent of the kings of Judah was Hezekiah. Of several indeed is it said, that they did that which was right in the sight of the Lord; but it was a high commendation of Hezekiah, that he did so "according to all that David his father had done." He came to the throne under the greatest disadvantages. His father had exceeded in wickedness all the kings that had been before him; and had caused all public acknowledgment of Jehovah to cease from the land. Under such circumstances it might have been supposed that Hezekiah, at the age of twenty-five, would have been infected with the prevailing impieties of his father's court, or, at all events, that he would not have dared to stem the torrent of iniquity that had borne down all before it: but no sooner was he placed upon his father's throne, than, even in the first year, and the very first month of his reign, he ordered the Temple to be opened, and all the defilements that were in it to be removed, and the worship of the Most High God to be restored. Though there was not that alacrity amongst the priests that might have been expected, the work was soon executed, and in sixteen days the Temple, with all its vessels, was prepared and sanctified for the service of God. The very next day, Hezekiah, having his heart set upon the blessed work, "rose early, and gathered the rulers of the city, and went up to the House of the Lord." The service which they performed on this occasion is related in the words which we have read: and it will serve as an excellent pattern for us on this occasion[a].

There are three things in particular to which we would call your attention:

I. Their numerous sacrifices—

[For the sin of a priest or of the whole congregation one bullock only was prescribed to be offered by the law[b]: but the impieties of the nation having exceeded all bounds, and been of long continuance, Hezekiah judged that seven bullocks, and an equal

[a] The re-opening of the Church after it had been shut up for repair.
[b] Lev. iv. 3, 14.

equal number of rams, and lambs, and he-goats, should be sacrificed as a sin-offering to the Lord: and of all of them in succession it is particularly recorded, that "*their blood was sprinkled on the altar.*" When the he-goats were offered, it is further noticed, that "the king and the congregation (by their representatives) *laid their hands upon them.*" Such was the way in which "an atonement was offered, and reconciliation made for all Israel."

And who does not here see the Gospel method of reconciliation with God through the great Sacrifice which was once offered on Mount Calvary? This it was which the sacrifices under the Law shadowed forth; and this it is which opens a way for our restoration to the Divine favour. "We are reconciled to God through the blood of the cross." By this one offering there is a new and living way consecrated for us through the veil; and by it sinners of every description may draw nigh to God with full assurance of faith.

But here let me particularly call your attention to those two points, *the sprinkling the blood upon the altar*, and *the laying of their hands upon the victims*. Never must we draw nigh to God on any occasion without adverting to these significant emblems, or rather without realizing that which was here figuratively proclaimed. *We must sprinkle the altar of our God with the Redeemer's blood:* we must actually bear in mind, and expressly declare before God, that all our hope of acceptance with him is through the atoning blood of Christ. That sentiment must be so fixed in the mind, and rooted in the heart, as never to be lost sight of for one moment. *The repetition in our text* shews us what must be continually repeated by us in every approach of our souls to God. As "without shedding of blood there is no remission of sins;" so without an express affiance in that blood as the only ground of our hopes there can be no application of that remission to our souls — — — O that this might be duly borne in mind by every one of us! But *we must* also with deep penitential sorrow *transfer our sins to the sacred head of Jesus.* "On him were the iniquities of all laid by God himself;" and *we* also must lay our iniquities upon him in the exercise of humble faith. It is by the mutual transfer, if I may so speak, of our sins to him, and of his righteousness to us, that we are to be freed from all our guilt, and to be made righteous in the sight of a holy God: "He was made sin for us, who knew no sin, that we (who had nothing but sin) might be made the righteousness of God in him[c]" — — — When Christ is thus kept in view in all our transactions with God, we need not fear but that God will be gracious unto us, and seal upon our souls a sense of his forgiving love.]

Let

[c] 2 Cor. v. 21.

Let us next notice,

II. Their joyful praises—

[Together with their humiliation, they offered unto God their praises and thanksgivings agreeably to the laws which had been prescribed by God himself. In this also are they worthy of our constant imitation: "In every thing by prayer and supplication, *with thanksgiving*, let your requests be made known unto God[d]," says the Apostle: and what God has so joined we ought not to put asunder.

But here also there are two things worthy of more particular notice: "*When the burnt-offering began, then the song of the Lord also began*:" and "*all this continued until the burnt-offering was finished*." There was no need to wait: their hearts might well be tuned to praise the very moment they looked to their burnt-offerings as the means of reconciliation with God: nor, as long as they continued so to do, was there the smallest occasion for relaxing in the expressions of their joy. So the very moment we look to the Saviour the Lord Jesus Christ, and plead with God the merit of his blood, we may begin to rejoice in God as our reconciled God and father. It is said, "All that believe are justified from all things;" not all that are *strong* in faith, or, all that have exercised faith for such *a length of time*, but *all who believe* (provided their faith be unfeigned) *are* from that very moment *justified* from all things, and may instantly "rejoice in hope of the glory of God[e]." St. John, speaking not to fathers only, or to young men, but to the weakest babes in Christ, says, "I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake[f]." There are many who think it a mark of humility to put away from them all joy, till, as they imagine, the progress of their sanctification shall justify the entrance of it into their souls. But this is altogether founded on ignorance and error. A sinner is not to look into *himself* for his warrant to rejoice in God: the mercy, the love, the truth, and faithfulness of God, together with the ability and willingness of Christ to save all who come unto God by him, are the proper grounds of joy, irrespective of any change actually wrought in us. We say not that a believer may not *afterwards* have much joy in the testimony of his own conscience that he has made a progress in the Divine life; (for St. Paul himself experienced *this* joy[g];) but the affiance of his soul on Christ interests him in all that Christ has done and suffered for him, and gives him an immediate title to partake of the fatted calf, which his heavenly Father has prepared for him. "Being delivered from the horrible pit, and having his feet put upon the rock, a new song instantly should

[d] Phil. iv. 6. [e] Acts xiii. 39. with Rom. v. 1, 2.
[f] 1 John ii. 12. [g] 2 Cor. i. 12.

should proceed from his mouth, even praise and thanksgiving to our God[h]." Nor should that song ever cease; because the efficacy of his Redeemer's sacrifice will never cease. We are bidden to "rejoice in the Lord *always*," yea "again and again to rejoice:" and indeed, humiliation and joy must be united in all our services to the very end of time — — — as they will be united even in heaven itself, where we shall cast our crowns at the Redeemer's feet, and sing to all eternity, "To him that loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood, be glory and dominion for ever and ever, Amen."]

At the close of that solemn service we particularly notice,

III. Their reverential obeisance—

[When they had made an end of offering, "the king and all that were present with him bowed themselves and worshipped." This remarkable termination of their worship indicated a grateful sense of the inestimable privilege which they had enjoyed of drawing nigh to God—an humble acknowledgment that they, and all that belonged to them, were the Lord's—and a determination of heart henceforth to dedicate themselves unreservedly to his service.

And thus it is that we should close our worship, whensoever we draw nigh to God in his public ordinances[i]. It is painful to see persons going from the house of God without a due sense of the awful solemnities in which they have been engaged. The light and airy manner with which persons renew their conferences with each other upon the common topics of the day, demonstrates, that their worship has been by no means such as God requires: had they really felt as redeemed sinners ought to feel, the savour of that intercourse with heaven would not so soon be lost. O, if men did but reflect on the mercy vouchsafed to them, in being permitted to sprinkle the blood of Christ upon the altar, to transfer all their guilt to him, and to receive from him the gift of his unspotted righteousness; if they duly considered what a right the Lord Jesus Christ had acquired over them in having bought them with his blood, and how much they are bound to glorify him with their bodies and their spirits which are his; methinks they would depart from the house of God with a holy solemnity upon their mind, and would continue in their way homeward secretly to commune with their God, and to harrow in by meditation and prayer the seed which has been sown upon their hearts. For want of this, even religious people often lose all the benefit of the ordinances which they have been privileged to enjoy. Earnestly would we intreat all persons to attend to these suggestions; and to bear in mind, whether they enter into

[h] Ps. xl. 2, 3. [i] See that admirable pattern, 1 Cor. xxix. 14.

into the house of God or depart from it, that it is the God of heaven and earth with whom they have to do, and to whom they must shortly give an account of all these privileges which by the generality are so lightly esteemed.

How the people remembered the vows that were upon them, was evident from the liberality with which they immediately presented their offerings to the Lord. O let us give up our whole selves to him a living sacrifice: and from a constraining sense of redeeming love, let us henceforth live, not unto ourselves, but unto Him who died for us and rose again.]

*** If any Collection be made on the occasion, the zeal and liberality of the worshippers, ver. 32, 33. may well be proposed as a pattern.

Or, if the occasion required, the different Officers of the Church or Parish might be exhorted, from the example of the Priests, and of the Levites in particular, to exert themselves in their respective callings to serve and honour God.

CCLXXXIX.

AFTER CONFIRMATION.

2 Chron. xxix. 31. *Then Hezekiah answered and said, Now ye have consecrated yourselves unto the Lord, come near, and bring sacrifices and thank-offerings into the House of the Lord.*

RELIGION is the brightest ornament of every state. Solomon was never more truly encircled with glory, than when he led the devotions of his people at the dedication of the Temple: nor was Hezekiah at any period of his reign more honourably employed, than when he was purifying that Temple from the abominations which had been introduced into it by his father Ahaz. The exhortation in our text was delivered by him to the whole congregation of Israel, after that the sacrifices for the purification of the Temple had been offered. And to you who are of the younger part of our audience they may with great propriety be addressed, after the services which you have this day been called to perform.

With a more immediate view to your benefit, we will consider,

I. The act in which you have been engaged—

You have been to the Bishop to be confirmed: and this is,

1. A solemn act—

[From the levity of too many who attend on these occasions, it may be thought to be a ceremony of no importance. But it is a most solemn transaction between God and your souls. You have this day been taking upon yourselves the vows which were made in your behalf at your baptism; and have been devoting yourselves to God as his servants: and, whether you have been sincere or not in the performance of the duty, the consequences of it will be very important: if you have given yourselves to the Lord in sincerity and truth, he has accepted you to his favour, and numbered you among his children: but, if you have lied unto God with your lips, you have riveted upon your souls your former iniquities, and provoked God to give you up to greater obduracy[a]———]

2. A reasonable act—

[The first-fruits of every thing were the Lord's: nor could any man appropriate them to his own use without the greatest impiety. Thus are the first-fruits of your time and strength to be given up to God. It is generally thought that the Jewish children at about twelve years of age went up to Jerusalem to be presented to the Lord in a more solemn manner: and we know that our blessed Lord went thither at this age, that he might in a more peculiar way than he had ever before done, engage in the services of "his Father's house." We cannot do better than follow his example in this particular. As soon as we have arrived at an age when we are capable of understanding and executing the vows that are upon us, we should go up to the House of the Lord, and there solemnly acknowledge our obligations to serve our God, and implore from him the grace and strength that shall be neeedful for us. This, we are expressly told, is "a reasonable service[b]."]

3. An irrevocable act—

[It was an established law, that if any thing whatsoever had been devoted to the Lord, it could not be recalled. Least of all then can you be liberated from the engagement which you have this day entered into, and which would have been binding upon you, even though you had never obeyed the call of your Diocesan in relation to it———]

But Confirmation is to be the commencement of a new and more determined course of devotedness to God. I will therefore proceed to mark,

II. The

[a] Isai. xxviii. 22. Rom. i. 21. [b] Rom. xii. 1.

II. The duty which yet remains to be performed—

The act in which you have this day been engaged must be,

1. Continued—

[The whole remainder of your lives is the time for the performance of your vows. There never will arrive a period when you are absolved from them, or when you are at liberty to relax your attention to them. Every morning and evening were the sacrifices offered in the Temple, and a double number on the seventh day: so must every day begin and end with fresh surrenders of yourselves to God; and the sabbath in particular must be a day of more than ordinary communion with him. "If you look back, after having put your hand to the plough, you are not fit for the kingdom of God:" yea, "if you draw back, it is to certain and everlasting perdition[c]."]

2. Progressive—

[After all had been done that was necessary for the purification of the Temple, Hezekiah called on the people to present sacrifices and thank-offerings unto the Lord: and, in consequence of this exhortation, they were presented in great numbers. The sacrifices which God desires of you are, not sheep and oxen, but the offering of a free, a contrite, a devoted heart[d]. And, as the first offerings which were presented, were from duty and necessity, and the last from a super-abundant zeal for God, and gratitude to his name, so are your surrenders of your hearts to God to be daily more willing, more grateful, more entire[e]———]

APPLICATION—

1. To *the young*, we recommend *the counsel* of Hezekiah—

[Never think you can do enough for him, who has bought you with his blood———]

2. To *the more advanced* we recommend *his admirable example*—

[Whatever influence you have, use it diligently for the Lord———]

[c] Luke ix. 62. Heb. x. 38, 39. [d] See Rom. xii. 1. before cited.
[e] Isai. xliv. 3—5. Jer. l. 4, 5.

CCXC.

HEZEKIAH'S ZEAL FOR THE GLORY OF GOD.

2 Chron. xxx. 1—11. *And Hezekiah sent to all Israel and Judah, and wrote letters also to Ephraim and Manasseh, that they should come to the House of the Lord at Jerusalem, to keep the Passover unto the Lord God of Israel. For the king had taken counsel, and his princes, and all the congregation in Jerusalem, to keep the passover in the second month. For they could not keep it at that time, because the priests had not sanctified themselves sufficiently, neither had the people gathered themselves together to Jerusalem. And the thing pleased the king and all the congregation. So they established a decree, to make proclamation throughout all Israel, from Beer-sheba even to Dan, that they should come to keep the passover unto the Lord God of Israel at Jerusalem: for they had not done it of a long time in such sort as it was written. So the posts went with the letters from the king and his princes throughout all Israel and Judah, and according to the commandment of the king, saying, Ye children of Israel, turn again unto the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, and he will return to the remnant of you that are escaped out of the hand of the kings of Assyria. And be not ye like your fathers, and like your brethren, which trespassed against the Lord God of their fathers, who therefore gave them up to desolation, as ye see. Now, be ye not stiff-necked, as your fathers were, but yield yourselves unto the Lord, and enter into his sanctuary, which he hath sanctified for ever: and serve the Lord your God, that the fierceness of his wrath may turn away from you. For, if ye turn again unto the Lord, your brethren and your children shall find compassion before them that led them captive, so that they shall come again into this land: for the Lord your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you, if ye return unto him. So the posts passed from city to city, through the country of Ephraim and Manasseh, even unto Zebulun: but they laughed them to scorn, and mocked them. Nevertheless divers of Asher, and Manasseh, and of Zebulun, humbled themselves, and came to Jerusalem.*

INFLUENCE is a talent of vast importance; but it is often most abused, where it exists in the highest degree. Kings and princes are rarely to be found amongst those who are foremost in the work of reformation: and, where their exertions are used, they are actuated as much by political principles as by those which are religious. Here however we see a monarch

a monarch uniting with all his princes in a work of piety, in which politics bore no part at all. Hezekiah, not content with calling on his own subjects to serve the Lord, sought to bring his very enemies to the same blessed state, even those enemies who not long before had "smitten them with a great slaughter," even "with a rage that reached up to heaven[a]." The account is so circumstantial and so beautiful, that I have comprised it all in my text; which will lead me to shew,

I. The efforts he used in the service of his God—

The object he sought to accomplish was one of primary importance—

[The Passover was the greatest of all the Jewish feasts, as the mercies which it was intended to commemorate were the greatest that had ever been vouchsafed to that people. The destruction of the Egyptian first-born was, as you know, confined to them. The Israelites throughout the whole land were exempt from the judgment inflicted on all others without exception. In order to their deliverance, they were to kill a lamb, and sprinkle the posts and lintels of their doors with its blood: and then the destroying angel was to pass over their houses without inflicting a stroke either on man or beast that was so protected. In commemoration of this wonderful event the Passover was to be kept with great strictness in all future ages. But it had been shamefully neglected during the reign of his father Ahaz; and was now therefore appointed to be kept with peculiar solemnity. This ordinance above all others typified our redemption through the blood of Christ. The appointment of God was, that it should be kept at Jerusalem: and this command was as binding upon the ten tribes of Israel as it was upon Judah and Benjamin. He summoned all therefore, as well the tribes of Israel who were not under his government, as the two tribes who were his immediate subjects, to engage in this holy duty: and he spared neither trouble nor expense to attain his end.]

The way in which he endeavoured to accomplish his end was peculiarly amiable and praise-worthy—

[Though a king, he used not so much the language of authority as of affectionate counsel and intreaty: "Turn again," said he, "unto the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Israel." "Be ye not stiff-necked, as your fathers were." He reminds them of the bitter consequences of their past departure from God, consequences which they could not but trace to that source, since the

[a] Chap. xxviii. 5, 9.

the very judgments which God's Prophets had denounced against them were actually visible in the desolations that were come upon them, a great part of their nation having been already taken captive by the king of Assyria. He then urges every argument that could influence an ingenuous mind. He assures them, that God would still be gracious to them, if they would but return to him: yea, that he would even restore to their own land those who had been taken captive, if they would but seek him with their whole hearts. In a word, he intreats them to "yield up themselves unreservedly unto God," in an assured expectation, that, if they returned to him in a way of penitential sorrow, he would return to them in a way of love and mercy.

Now the whole of this affords as bright a pattern of wisdom, and piety, and love, as is to be found in all the Jewish records.]

Let us then proceed to contemplate,

II. The success with which those efforts were attended—

This was far from being so complete as might have been expected. Some only "mocked his messengers, and laughed them to scorn"—

[However closely we examine the message which he sent, we shall find in it nothing that could give just occasion for ridicule or contempt. But ungodly men, even in self-defence, deride every thing which savours of piety. They have done so in every age. When Lot intreated his sons-in-law to escape out of Sodom, "he seemed," we are told, "as one who mocked to his sons-in-law," so ridiculous were his exhortations in their eyes. In precisely the same way were all the messages delivered by the Prophets regarded; till God was provoked to give up his people to utter desolation [b]. It might be supposed that the infinite perfections of our blessed Lord should disarm such malice; and that his words at least would be universally received. But many who heard them regarded him only as a deceiver and a demoniac. The very Pharisees, who from their knowledge of the Scriptures might have been supposed to form a more correct judgment, derided him as much as others; because they were addicted to the sins which he reproved [c]. The holy Apostles shared the same fate with their divine Master; and when most "speaking the words of truth and soberness" were most virulently derided as babblers and as fools [d]. And thus it is at the present hour. Every man who seeks to reclaim a world that lieth in wickedness will be reproached and persecuted, and, generally speaking, will be persecuted in proportion to his fidelity.]

Some however complied with his exhortations—

[Among

[b] Chap. xxxvi. 16. [c] Luke xvi. 14. [d] Acts xxvi. 24, 25.

[Among the tribes of Judah and Benjamin there was a great unanimity in turning to the Lord, because "the hand of God was with them, to give them" an obedient heart. And from amongst the tribes of Israel also many "humbled themselves, and came to Jerusalem." These kept the feast with great joy and gladness[e]: yea, so did they delight in the pious work, that when they had fulfilled the week which God had appointed for the celebration of the feast, they were anxious of themselves to continue it another week[f], notwithstanding the protracting of the period interfered with the pressing engagements of the harvest. Say whether *this* was not a rich compensation to Hezekiah for all the ridicule which the contemners of his piety had cast upon him? Yes, if one soul be of more value than the whole word, no doubt but that the welfare of so many souls was in his eyes an abundant recompence for all his toil and labour.]

That we may not confine our thoughts to the events of that day, but may render them profitable to our own souls, I shall consider myself as a messenger sent on a similar occasion to you, not from an earthly monarch, but from the King of kings—

[You would I call to keep a Passover unto the Lord: for "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us." O consider the benefits you derive from his blood sprinkled on your souls! ——— Think of yourselves as the very-first born whom he has redeemed unto God, and who are the Lord's peculiar portion ——— Think how grievously this mystery has been neglected by you and by all around you ——— And how manifest is his indignation against the contemners of his love and mercy! See, and tell me, are not the great mass around you enslaved by sin, and carried captive by the devil at his will? ——— Have not you yourselves too much reason to fear his displeasure on account of your multiplied iniquities? Turn then unto him in penitence and prayer; yea, turn unto him with your whole hearts. I would urge this by every consideration that is proper to influence the human mind. Think how gracious your Redeemer is, and ready both to receive you to mercy, and to deliver you out of the hands of your spiritual enemies ——— Think too how awful will be the consequence of continuing to rebel against him ——— "Be no longer stiff-necked," but turn to him, and "yield yourselves entirely to him." This is your reasonable service[g]:" and if ungodly men deride and mock your piety, let it suffice you that you shall at least have the approbation of your God ———

And to you who have influence let me say, Exert that influence in behalf of all to whom it can extend. Use it abroad as well as at home; amongst enemies, as well as friends. Seek to recover the dispersed

[e] ver. 21. [f] ver. 23. [g] Rom. xii. 1.

dispersed of Israel and of Judah to the service of their God, that they may participate with you the mercies purchased for them by the blood of the Paschal Lamb — — —]

CCXCI.

THE WEAKNESS AND DEPRAVITY OF MAN.

2 Chron. xxxii. 31. *God left him to try him, that he might know all that was in his heart.*

THERE is no character so excellent but there is some blot to be found in it. The most illustrious saints that ever lived, not only betrayed their weakness and sinfulness, but shewed themselves defective in those very graces for which they were most eminent. We must not wonder therefore that Hezekiah, who was in some respects as distinguished a character as any that either preceded or followed him, became at last a monument of human frailty. It is probable that the peculiar manifestations of the Divine favour towards him had, excited an undue degree of self-complacency in his mind: God therefore saw fit to try him, and, "in the business of the ambassadors of the princes of Babylon, who had sent unto him to inquire of the wonder that was done in the land," (even of the shadow of the sun going backward ten degrees on the sun-dial of Ahaz,) "left him" to the natural workings of his own heart. The consequence was such as might be apprehended; he gave way to pride and vanity, and brought on himself the Divine displeasure.

The words which we have read, will naturally lead us to observe, that,

I. Till we are tried, we have very little idea of the evil of our hearts—

[Though we feel no difficulty in admitting that we are sinners, yet we can by no means acknowledge the truth of the representations given of us in the Scriptures. If we were told that we are all by nature haters both of God[a] and man[b], we should consider it as a libel upon human nature. When we read the history of the Jews, we are ready to think that they were incomparably

[a] Rom. i. 30. & viii. 7. [b] Tit. iii. 3.

incomparably more perverse than we should ever be: though if we had been in their situation, there is no reason at all to believe that we should have shewn ourselves in any respect more obedient than they. If we have never fallen into any gross sin, we imagine that our moral conduct has arisen from the superior goodness of our hearts; and we suppose that we have no disposition to those iniquities which are practised by others. We are not aware, that, if we had been subjected to the same trials as others, we should probably have fallen like them. How was Hazael shocked when he was told what enormities he would commit! "Is thy servant a dog, that he should commit this thing[c]?" Yet, no sooner was he tried, than he did commit all the enormities that had been foretold. And we, if told, that one of us would become a thief, another an adulterer, and another a murderer, should revolt at the idea, as though we were not capable of such atrocious wickedness: but the more we know of our own hearts, the more we shall be ready to say with David, "My heart sheweth me the wickedness of the ungodly[d]," yea, it is an epitome of all the wickedness that is committed upon earth.]

It becomes us to deprecate temptation; since,

II. If left to ourselves, we shall soon give some awful proof of our depravity—

[That any persons are preserved from great enormities is owing to the providence and the grace of God. It has pleased God to encompass them, so that they should be screened from any violent temptation; or else he has endued them with a more abundant measure of his grace, whereby they have been enabled to withstand the tempter. Who that sees how others have fallen, will ascribe his own stedfastness to an arm of flesh? We need only set before us those deplorable monuments of human depravity, David, Solomon, and Peter, and we shall need nothing more to enforce that admonition, "Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall[e]"———We perhaps may have maintained a good conduct for a considerable time: but can we not look back to some moment wherein we have been left to follow the bent of our own corrupt hearts? We must be lamentably ignorant of what has passed within us, if we have not long since learned our need to use that prayer, "Hold thou me up, and I shall be safe."]

Yet we must not view such proofs of depravity merely as insulated and detached acts: for

III. One

[c] 2 Kin. viii. 12, 13.

[d] Ps. xxxvi. 1. The Prayer-book Translation. See also Mark vii. 21—23. & Jer. xvii. 9.

[e] These instances should be opened separately, and at some length.

III. One single act of wickedness, if duly considered, will serve as a clue to find out all the iniquity of our hearts—

[God did not design to shew Hezekiah one imperfection only, but "all that was in his heart[e]:" and his fall was well calculated to give him this knowledge; for in it he might see, not only his pride and creature-confidence, but his ingratitude for the mercies he had received, his unconcern about the souls of those who came to visit him, his indifference about the honour of his God, and innumerable other evils which were comprehended in his sin[f]. Thus, if we will take any one sin of our lives, and make use of it as a light to search the dark corners of our hearts, we shall find out a most astonishing mass of wickedness that has hitherto escaped our observation. Take, for instance, any single act of pride, wrath, lewdness, covetousness, or even deadness in prayer, what a scene will it open to our view! what unmindfulness of the Divine presence! what unconcern about our own souls! what preferring of carnal ease or worldly vanities to the happiness and glory of heaven! what contempt of that adorable Saviour who shed his blood for us! Alas! alas! we should never come to an end, if we should attempt to declare all the evil which by such a scrutiny we might discover.

This then we would most earnestly recommend as the means of becoming acquainted with our hearts: let us not consider any sin as though it were unconnected with any other; but rather regard every sin as a fruit of an immense tree, or as a little stream flowing from an inexhaustible fountain.]

From this dereliction of Hezekiah, and his fall consequent upon it, we may FURTHER LEARN,

1. Thankfulness to God for the preservation we have experienced—

[None of us have perpetrated one thousandth part of the iniquity which we should have been guilty of, if God had not restrained us by his providence and grace. Let us not then "sacrifice to our own net, or burn incense to our own drag." Let us rather acknowledge, that by the grace of God we are what we are, and say, "Not unto us, not unto us, but unto thy name be the praise." And let our dependence be altogether on God, that

[e] The text may mean, that God left Hezekiah in order that *he*, namely *God*, might know all that was in his heart. See Deut. viii. 2. & xiii. 2, 3. But the sense given to the words seems preferable.

[f] If, as is thought, the Babylonians who came to inquire into the miracle of the sun's retrograde motion were worshippers of the sun, what an opportunity had Hezekiah to tell them about Jehovah, who created that sun, and could continue or alter its course at his pleasure!

that he who has kept us hitherto, will "preserve us unto his heavenly kingdom."]

2. Tenderness and compassion towards those who have fallen—

[We are apt to look on a fallen brother with indignation and contempt: but if we considered more attentively our own extreme sinfulness, and how often we should have fallen if outward temptations had concurred sufficiently with our inward dispositions, we shall find less readiness to cast a stone at others: we shall rather see our own picture in their depravity, and extend that compassion to them which in similar circumstances we should desire to meet with at their hands.]

3. Vigilance against the assaults of our great adversary—

[Satan combines in himself the subtlety of a serpent, and the strength of a lion. Well therefore does the Apostle say to us, "Be sober, be vigilant." If we watch not against his assaults, we, in fact, tempt him to tempt us. Besides, we cannot expect that God should preserve us, if we do not endeavour to preserve ourselves. It will be to little purpose to pray that God will not lead us into temptation, if we presumptuously rush into it of our own accord. Let us then shun the occasions of sin: let us avoid the company, the amusements, the books, yea the very sights that may administer to sin. Let us commit ourselves continually to God's care and protection; and beg of him never to leave us or forsake us. In this way we may hope to experience his unremitting care, and to be "kept by his power through faith unto everlasting salvation."]

CCXCII.

MANASSEH'S REPENTANCE.

2 Chron. xxxiii. 10—13. *And the Lord spake to Manasseh, and to his people; but they would not hearken. Wherefore the Lord brought upon them the captains of the host of the king of Assyria, which took Manasseh among the thorns, and bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylon. And when he was in affliction, he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, and prayed unto him. And he was intreated of him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord he was God.*

IN

IN histories written by men, our attention is continually directed to second causes; but in the inspired Records we see every event traced up to the first Great Cause of all. The rise and fall of empires or of individuals are equally appointed of God for the accomplishment of his own gracious purposes, and for the manifestation of his own glory: and, however casual or contingent any circumstances may appear to be, they are as much under his controul, and as certainly fulfil his will, as the stated courses of the heavenly bodies.

In confirmation of this, we need go no further than to the words before us; in which we see,

I. The means by which Manasseh was brought to repentance—

[King Manasseh was perhaps the most wicked of the human race: he was piously educated; yet he totally eradicated from his own mind, and from the breasts of his people, all remembrance of the instructions which his father Hezekiah had given them. He consulted wizards, set up idols even in the House of God itself, made his children pass through fire to Moloch, and filled Jerusalem with the blood of innocents from one end to another. He acted himself, and caused all his people to act, worse than the heathen whom God had cast out for their impieties[a].

To reclaim him, God had sent many holy men and prophets to warn and exhort him: but, "neither he nor his people would hearken unto them."

At last, determined to overcome him, and to make him an everlasting monument of grace and mercy, God stirred up the king of Assyria against him[b]; and caused Manasseh to be vanquished, to be dragged from the thicket where he had secreted himself[c], and to be carried a poor miserable captive in fetters to Babylon.

This prevailed, when all other means had been used in vain. And is it not by these means that God has often subdued, and yet subdues many stout-hearted sinners to himself[cc]? How many perhaps amongst us must say, "It is good for *me* that I have been

[a] Compare 2 Kin. xxi. with the preceding part of this chapter.

[b] The king of Babylon, who on account of his having added Assyria to his dominions is called the king of Assyria, is said to have been "brought upon" Manasseh by God himself. And, however he might be actuated by ambition or avarice, he was certainly no more than an instrument by whom God himself acted. Compare Ps. xvii. 13. & Isai. x. 5, 6, 15. with 2 Kin. xxiv. 2—4.

[c] 1 Sam. xiii. 6. [cc] 2 Sam. xxiv. 10, 17

been afflicted; for before I was afflicted I went astray; but now have I kept thy word[d]."]

We are further informed concerning,

II. The way in which his repentance shewed itself—

[Affliction does not necessarily produce repentance. Ahaz trespassed yet more in his distress[e]; and the wicked in hell, so far from being softened by their pains, blaspheme their God while they gnaw their tongues for anguish[f]. But in him it was effectual, through the grace of God, to bring him to repentance. In his prosperity he was hardened[g], and would not hear[h]; but "in his affliction he besought the Lord."

Two things more especially are noticed: "he humbled himself greatly;" and "he prayed unto God" earnestly. He called his ways to remembrance and confessed his guilt, and justified God in all that had come upon him, and in all that ever should come upon him, declaring it was far "less than his iniquities deserved." Then he poured out his soul in fervent prayer, "offering his supplications with strong crying and tears," and wrestling, as it were, with God, to obtain a blessing[i].

Thus will repentance shew itself, wherever it is found: whether we be brought to it by afflictions, or not; yea, whether we have committed such wickedness as Manasseh, or not; these will be the leading features of our experience, if we be truly penitent. The first mark of Paul's repentance was, "Behold, he prayeth!" and what his thoughts of himself were, we may judge from his calling himself "the chief of sinners." Inquire then, beloved Brethren, whether you have ever been brought to humble yourselves before God; and that not a little, but "*greatly?*" Inquire, whether your cries to God are humble, fervent, constant, believing? Consider, "that without repentance you must all perish:" and this alone will warrant you to conclude your repentance genuine and "saving."]

Its efficacy will appear from,

III. The blessed issue of it—

[Horrible as his iniquities had been, they did not prevent his prayers from coming up with acceptance before God.

Behold the issue of this repentance, first, *in respect to his temporal comfort!* God restored him again to the possession of his kingdom. And it is certain that innumerable judgments would be removed from men, provided the offenders were duly humbled by means of them. We say not indeed that God will always remove the afflictions he has sent, even though we should be

[d] Ps. cxix. 67, 71. [e] 2 Chron. xxviii. 22. [f] Rev. xvi. 10.
[g] Jer. xxii. 21. [h] Zech. vii. 11, 12. Jer. v. 3.
[i] His prayer is *repeatedly* noticed, ver. 18, 19. doubtless on account of its fervour.

be ever so much humbled under them; because he may see that the continuance of them is as necessary for our welfare as the first sending of them was: but he will convert them into blessings, and make them subservient to our best interests.

Next, observe the issue of his repentance *in respect to his spiritual advantage*. He neither knew God, nor concerned himself about him in the day of his prosperity: but now he "knew that Jehovah was God." He saw that he was a just and holy God, yea, a God of truth also, who sooner or later would punish sin. He felt that he was a powerful God, "able to abase those who walk in pride," and able also to deliver those whose situation was most desperate. Above all, he knew experimentally that God was a God of infinite mercy and compassion, since he had attended to his prayer, and vouchsafed mercy to his guilty soul. Under this conviction he strove, to the latest hour of his life, to remedy all the evil he had ever done, and to glorify his God as much as he had before dishonoured him.

And did ever any one repent, and not find his repentance issue in clearer manifestations of God's love to his soul, and in a richer experience of his power and grace? No: as long as the world stands, "God will comfort all that mourn in Zion, and give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness."]

We may LEARN then from hence,

1. The importance of improving ordinances—

[The contempt poured on God's messages was one principal mean of bringing down those judgments on Manasseh. And does not God speak to us by his Ministers; and notice how we receive the word? And will not that "word be a savour of death unto us, if it be not a savour of life unto life?" Lay this to heart, all ye who have heard the word in vain: and know that if you slight the message which God sends you by his Ministers, he will consider you as pouring contempt upon himself[k].]

2. The use and benefit of afflictions—

[Afflictions, of whatever kind they be, proceed from God; and are intended for our good[l]. They have a voice, no less than his Ministers; and it is our duty to "hear the rod, and Him that appointed it[m]." Quarrel not then with any afflictions that may be sent you; but receive them as tokens of God's love, and as messengers of his mercy. What reason had Manasseh to adore his God for the loss of an empire, yea, for cruel captivity, for galling fetters, and a lothesome dungeon! Without them he had been now in chains of darkness and the prison of hell. Thy trials probably are no less necessary for thine eternal welfare.

Improve

[k] 1 Thess. iv. 8. [l] Hos. v. 15. Heb. xii. 10. [m] Mic. vi. 9.

Improve them then for the humbling of thy soul, and for the furtherance of thine everlasting salvation.]

3. The wonderful mercy of our God—

[Who would have thought that such a sinner as Manasseh could ever have obtained mercy? Yet God has pardoned him, and set him forth as a pattern, in order to magnify the exceeding riches of his own grace. Let none then despair. If we were as vile as Manasseh himself, we should go to God with an assurance that he would not cast us out, provided we were truly contrite, and sought for mercy through the blood of Jesus. On the other hand, let us not presume upon this mercy, and go on in sin under the hope that we shall at last repent and be saved. To-day God calls us; to-morrow the door of mercy may be shut. The Lord grant that we may now repent like Manasseh, and henceforth like him devote ourselves entirely to the service of our God!]

CCXCIII.

JOSIAH'S PENITENCE.

2 Chron. xxxiv. 27. *Because thine heart was tender, and thou didst humble thyself before God when thou heardest his words against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, and humbledst thyself before me, and didst rend thy clothes and weep before me, I have even heard thee also, saith the Lord.*

IT is scarcely to be conceived how great a benefit has arisen to the Christian cause from the invention of printing. The word of God is that whereby the work of salvation is principally carried on in the souls of men: and the multiplying of copies of the holy Scriptures, in such a form as to be conveniently portable, and at such a price as to be within the reach of the poor, has tended more than any other thing to keep alive the interests of religion, both in the hearts of individuals, and in the community at large. If we look back to the condition of the Jews in the time of king Josiah, we shall find it truly deplorable. Through the influence of the two preceding kings, the very remembrance of God's law was almost obliterated from the minds of men. Every king was, by God's appointment, to copy it

for himself[a]: yet not a copy of it was to be seen in the land: so that if God himself had not interposed in his providence to raise up to the Jews a pious king, and by him to bring back the people to some sense of their duty, it is probable that the whole nation would ere long have been immersed in heathen darkness. From the traces of Divine knowledge which yet remained by means of the Temple and its furniture, and through the operation of God's Spirit on his soul, Josiah was induced to repair the Temple, in order to the restoring of God's worship there: and Hilkiah the priest, while executing his orders, found a copy (perhaps the original copy) of the Law, which had been lost amidst the rubbish and ruins of the place. On hearing its contents, Josiah was filled with great anguish, and sent to Huldah the prophetess to know whether the judgments which God had denounced against that apostate nation might by any means be averted: in reply to which he was informed, that the calamities would surely come upon them; but that, in consideration of his penitence, the awful period should not arrive till he himself should be removed to a better world.

From the words before us we shall take occasion to shew,

I. What state of mind the threatenings of God should produce in us—

The conduct of Josiah on this occasion will serve to guide our thoughts.

The threatenings of God should produce in us,

1. A fear of his judgments—

[If men can puff "at God's judgments[b]," it is because they have never considered how tremendous they are. Let any man once think seriously of "dwelling with everlasting burnings[c]," and we will defy him not to tremble, like Felix[d] and Belshazzar[e]. Josiah "rent his clothes" with horror, when he heard only of temporal calamities: how much more therefore ought we to fear, when we hear of the miseries that will be endured in "the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone!"]

2. A

[a] Deut. xvii. 18. [b] Ps. x. 5.
[c] Isai. xxxiii. 14. See also Mark ix. 43—48. & Rev. xiv. 10, 11.
[d] Acts xxiv. 25. [e] Dan. v. 5, 6.

2. A sorrow of heart for those sins against which his judgments are denounced—

[We are ready to acknowledge, that they who have committed gross sins should mourn for their iniquities. But we should remember that the judgments of God are denounced also against pride, unbelief, impenitence, worldly-mindedness, and numberless other secret sins, which are overlooked, or even commended, by the world. For these therefore must we "weep, and humble ourselves before God," yea, and lothe ourselves for them in dust and ashes.]

3. A turning unto God in holy and unreserved obedience—

[This is the true test of sincerity: fears and sorrows are of little avail, if they produce not a thorough change of heart and life. Josiah, from the first moment that he heard the threatenings of God, set himself to accomplish a national reformation, and prosecuted it with zeal to his dying hour. Thus must we be zealous for our God. We must not pretend to be sorry for our sins, and still continue to live in them; but we must put away the accursed thing, whatever it be, and devote ourselves to God without reserve. It is he only who "confesseth *and forsaketh* his sins, that shall find mercy[f]."]

To promote such a state of mind amongst you, we proceed to shew,

II. Its acceptableness to God—

The message sent to Josiah sufficiently marks this. God assured him that his prayer was heard in consideration of his penitence. But that such a state of mind is at all times acceptable to God, will more clearly appear, if we consider that,

1. By it all the perfections of God are glorified—

[Repentance is often called "a giving glory to God[g];" and the propriety of this expression is evident: for, exactly as the impenitent man pours contempt on all the Divine perfections, setting at nought the power and majesty, the justice and holiness, the love and mercy, the truth and faithfulness of God; so, on the contrary, the penitent brings glory to them all, inasmuch as he acknowledges his obnoxiousness to the Divine displeasure, and his ardent desire to obtain an interest in the promises of the Gospel. If then God be concerned for his own glory, he cannot but be pleased with those who, in his appointed way, are labouring to advance it.]

2. To

[f] Prov. xxviii. 13. [g] Josh. vii. 19. Jer. xiii. 16.

2. To it all the promises of God are made—

[Many are the judgments denounced against the stout-hearted: but in all the inspired volume there is not one word to "break a bruised reed." On the contrary, the weary and heavy-laden are invited to come to Christ without any distinction on account of the particular sins with which they are burthened. God assures the contrite soul, while it is yet trembling at his word, that he will look upon it with peculiar pleasure and complacency[h]; and that though a man's conduct may have been such as to fix indelible disgrace upon him in the world, God will never despise him, provided he be of a broken and contrite spirit[i]. Not even the transient humiliation of Ahab was suffered to pass without some favourable regard[k]: much less shall that be overlooked which is sincere and permanent[l]. It is indeed not for any merit that there is in our repentance, but for the merits of Jesus Christ, that we shall find acceptance: nevertheless all true penitents, and none other, shall be saved by him.]

INFER,

1. How desirable is it to be well acquainted with the holy Scriptures!

[The word of God denounces vengeance against many characters that are thought innocent among men: nor will our ignorance of these threatenings avert or delay the execution of them. Let us then study the Sacred Oracles with an express reference to ourselves, that we may know what God says in them respecting *us*. Peradventure we may find many passages, which, when applied to our hearts, will give us just occasion to mourn like the pious monarch before us. Better were it far to know the full extent of our guilt, and thereby to be stimulated to repentance, than through ignorance of our state to continue impenitent, till the wrath of God shall come upon us to the uttermost.]

2. How enviable is the condition of a true penitent!

[Every prayer of a real penitent is "heard" of God. Let him "open his mouth ever so wide, God will fill it[m]." Let him but plead what the Lord Jesus has done and suffered for him, and God will never cast out his prayer. Surely then there is no man so truly happy as he who "walks humbly with his God." Indeed our Lord himself repeatedly tells us this; "Blessed are the poor in spirit: blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted[n]."

But it may be thought that such an abject state of mind would be

[h] Isai. lxvi. 2. [i] Ps. li. 17. [k] 1 Kin. xxi. 29.
[l] Ps. xxxiv. 18. [m] Isai. lv. 7. [n] Matt. v. 3, 4.

be unsuitable to a man of power and opulence. The Jewish monarch however entertained no such vain conceit; he judged it not unbecoming even his high station to feel, yea to manifest also to all around him, a fear of God. Let all of us then, the high as well as the low, the spiritual as well as the profane, seek to have "a tender heart." Let us beg of God "to take away from us the heart of stone, and to give us hearts of flesh," well knowing, that the more exquisite our sensibility is with respect to sin, the more pleasing will be our state before God.]

CCXCIV.

FORBEARANCE OF GOD BROUGHT TO A CLOSE.

2 Chron. xxxvi. 15, 16. *And the Lord God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because he had compassion on his people, and on his dwelling-place: but they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against his people, till there was no remedy.*

IN speaking of the Divine perfections, it is common to represent them all as infinite, because they do not admit of any increase: but perhaps it would be more correct to speak of them as limited, because they all so limit each other as to produce one harmonious agency in all their operations; every perfection being exercised so far, and so far only, as is consistent with the glory of the whole Deity. Justice, for instance, never exerts itself to the disparagement of mercy; nor does mercy ever triumph over the rights of justice: so neither does patience interpose for the arresting of judgment, any longer than consists with the claims of holiness: as soon as ever its protracted influence would reflect dishonour on God as the moral Governor of the universe, it recedes, and leaves the sword of vengeance to execute its heavenly commission. The truth of this statement fully appears from the words before us; from which we are naturally led to notice,

I. God's patience exercised—

It was exercised to a most astonishing degree towards his people of old—

[The

[The Scripture frequently speaks of God, not only as sending messengers to his people, but as "rising early" and sending them. This intimates, that as soon as ever they went astray, he commissioned his servants to reclaim them; yea, many hundred years before the final execution of his judgments upon them, he forewarned them how he would proceed, and cautioned them against driving him to such extremities[a]— — —When these warnings were disregarded, he sent them prophets, to bring these things to their remembrance, and to plead with them in his name. Sometimes he raised up prophets for particular occasions; at other times he continued them for many years in their office, in order by any means to turn the people from their sins. Full of "compassion towards his people," and averse to forsake the land which he had given them for a "dwelling-place," he bore with all their frowardness and perverseness; "many a time turning away his anger," when he might justly have broken forth against them, and made them monuments of his everlasting indignation[b].

But how did they requite his tender mercies? "They mocked his messengers (we are told), and despised his words, and misused his Prophets." Even against Moses himself did their resentment frequently burn, insomuch that on one occasion they were ready to stone him[c]. Their Prophets in every successive age were treated with all manner of indignities, menaced, imprisoned, martyred, according as the wrath of their rulers was permitted to prevail. "Which of the Prophets have not your fathers persecuted?" said St. Stephen[d]; and our blessed Lord, to comfort his Disciples under the trials which they would meet with, reminded them, that "so had the Prophets been persecuted, who were before them[e]."]

In like manner is it exercised in reference to us—

[God is yet sending his ambassadors to us, not merely to reprove and warn, or to encourage us with a hope of temporal rewards, as he did to the Jews, but to offer us redemption through the blood of his dear Son, and to beseech us to accept of reconciliation with him[f]— — —And such is his "compassion towards us," that he cannot endure the thought of giving us up[g], as long as a hope remains of converting us to himself[g]— — —

And what return do we make to God? Do we not act precisely as the Jews before us did? There is no faithful messenger that addresses us in Jehovah's name, but we call him an enthusiast; however temperate and kind, and reasonable his exhortations

[a] Lev. xxvi. 14—39. & Deut. xxviii. 15—68.
[b] Ps. lxxviii. 38. & cvi. 13—48. [c] Exod. xvii. 4.
[d] Acts vii. 52. [e] Matt. v. 12. [f] 2 Cor. v. 18—20.
[g] Ezek. xxxiii. 11. Jer. xiii. 27. Hos. xi. 8.

tations may be[h], we mock and deride him as "a babbler[i]," "a deceiver[k]," and "a fellow that ought not to be tolerated[l]." Our blessed Lord himself, who "spake as never man spake," was accounted a madman and a demoniac[m]; and every faithful servant of God from his day even to the present hour, has been made an object, though not of equal, yet certainly of similar, reproach. One would suppose that men, with the sacred volume in their hands, seeing how the Prophets and Apostles were all treated, would avoid treading in the steps of former persecutors: but the enmity of the human heart against God is the same as ever; and the messages of God are therefore treated with the same contempt as ever. If there be any difference as to the mode in which that enmity betrays itself, it is owing to the excellence of our laws, and not to any superiority in us above the Jews. Our dispositions are the same as theirs, and our abuse of God's tender mercies is the same.]

In the sequel of our text we see,

II. God's patience exhausted—

He was at last constrained to execute upon them his threatened vengeance—

[After bearing with their frowardness many hundred years, his wrath against them was kindled, and he gave them up into the hands of their enemies[n]. Every effort for their preservation had been tried in vain, and "no remedy now remained:" the people therefore were sent into captivity; and both their city and Temple were destroyed.]

Thus also will he do with respect to us—

[If we go on incessantly "grieving the Holy Spirit," we shall at last "quench" his sacred motions[o]. There is a time beyond which God will bear with us no longer[p]. There is a day of grace wherein he will be found[q]; an accepted time in which salvation may be secured by us[r]. But there is a time when he will say, "Let them alone[s];" "Let their eyes be blinded and their hearts be hardened[t]:" "I am weary with repenting[u]:" and now, "though they cry I will not hear, though they make many prayers I will not regard them[x]."

Doubtless if a person were truly penitent, he would be heard and

[h] See particularly the temperate message sent by Hezekiah, 2 Chron. xxx. 6—10.
[i] Acts xvii. 18. Ezek. xx. 40.
[k] John vii. 12.
[l] Acts xxii. 22. & xxiv. v.
[m] John x. 20.
[n] ver. 17—21.
[o] Eph. iv. 30. 1 Thess. v. 19.
[p] Matt. xxiii. 37, 38.
[q] Luke xix. 41—44.
[r] 2 Cor. vi. 2. Isai. lv. 6.
[s] Hos. iv. 17.
[t] Acts xxviii. 25—27.
[u] Jer. xv. 6.
[x] Prov. i. 24—31.

and accepted at the last hour: but it is God alone who can give repentance: and, if we continue obstinately to resist his calls, he will cease to strive with us[y], and will give us over to final impenitence[z]. This he has done in unnumbered instances; and this he warns us to expect at his hands: "He that being often reproved hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy[a]."]

ADDRESS—

[God speaks to men by his word and Ministers at this day, as truly as ever he did either by Prophets or Apostles: and our word, as far as it is agreeable to the Scriptures of truth, is to be "received, not as the word of man, but of God[b]:" and, if any man "despiseth it, he despiseth not man, but God[c]." Happy would it be if this matter were duly considered: for certainly there are many, of a proud and contemptuous spirit, who instead of "trembling at the word," as they ought[d], and "humbling themselves before the Ministers" of Jehovah[e], make light of all they hear[f], and turn it to derision[g]. But to such God says, "Be ye not mockers, lest your bands be made strong[h]." There is great danger lest they "be holden with the cords of their own sins[i]," and be given up to their own delusions[k].

On the other hand, let not any imagine that an attachment to faithful Ministers, or a love to the ordinances as dispensed by them, will necessarily prove us to be in a state of acceptance with God: for Ezekiel's hearers were delighted with his discourses, whilst yet they were by no means conformed to the precepts delivered by him[l]. Inquire then whether you be really obedient to the Gospel, receiving Christ as the gift of God to your souls, relying on him as your only hope, rejoicing in him as your all-sufficient Saviour, and devoting yourselves to him in all holy obedience. The tree must be judged of by its fruits alone. If your fruits be not yet such as might be wished, apply the "remedy:" go to Christ for the remission of your sins, and seek from him the gift of his Holy Spirit: then shall the Gospel have its due effect, and be "the power of God to the salvation of your souls."]

[y] Gen. vi. 3. [z] Ps. lxxxi. 11, 12. [a] Prov. xxix. 1.
[b] 1 Thess. ii. 13. [c] 1 Thess. iv. 8. [d] Isai. lxvi. 2.
[e] ver. 12. [f] Matt. xxii. 5. [g] Jer. xx. 7, 8.
[h] Isai. xxviii. 22. [i] Prov. v. 22.
[k] Isai. lxvi. 4. 2 Thess. ii. 10—12. [l] Ezek. xxxiii. 31, 32.

CCXCV.

THE SUBSERVIENCY OF A FAITHFUL MINISTRY TO THE ERECTION OF GOD'S SPIRITUAL TEMPLE.

Ezra vi. 14. *And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the Prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo.*

THE purposes of God, whatever difficulties may seem to obstruct the execution of them, are all accomplished in due season. The deliverance of his people from Babylon, and the rebuilding of the Temple at Jerusalem, though in themselves the most improbable events, were effected with a facility the most surprising. The heart of Cyrus was moved to give the orders that were requisite; and though the constructing of the Temple was retarded by unforeseen obstacles, yet afterwards, through the exhortations of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, that laborious work was finished in the space of four years.

We shall offer a few remarks upon,

I. The building of the Temple through the instrumentality of the fore-mentioned Prophets.

Many difficulties obstructed the progress of the work—

[Scarcely was the foundation laid, before an attempt was made to impede the work through *the hypocrisy of pretended friends*. The Samaritans offered to co-operate with the Jews in raising the intended fabric: but their design was to frustrate, rather than promote, the completion of it. And though this appears at first sight to be a strange mode of shewing hostility, yet is it indeed most common, both in political contests, and in the concerns of religion. Many will profess to desire the same objects, and will offer to concur in prosecuting them to a certain point, who, if their offers were accepted, would only defeat the ends proposed — — — The Jews, however, aware of the snares thus laid for them, determined to prosecute their work alone[a].

That device having failed, they were assaulted by *the hostility of open enemies*. Complaints were made against them to the governing powers, and they were represented as plotting to regain their liberty and independence. Their former endeavours to cast off the Babylonish yoke were referred to as proofs of their present disposition to rebel against the king of Persia[b]. It is in this

[a] Ch. iv. 1—3. [b] ib. ver. 4—16.

this way that the servants of God have been assailed in all ages: our blessed Lord was calumniated as an enemy to Cæsar; and his Apostles, as "movers of sedition:" and, if at any period of the Church an occasion can be found against the people of God, the record of it shall be brought against them in all future ages, and the evils of one party (as of the Puritans, for instance) shall be made to characterize religion itself, and all who profess it: and a sense of duty and of regard for the public welfare shall be artfully pleaded as an apology for the measures, which in reality were dictated by nothing but a rooted aversion to the cause of God[c].

This plan having too fatally succeeded, the Jews yielded to despondency, and for the space of fifteen years suspended the work in which they had engaged[d]. *A spirit of indolence and supineness* soon prevailed among them, and would have operated to a total dereliction of the work, if God had not sent his Prophets to rouse them from their lethargy. And indeed this is the greatest obstacle to every good work, since the longer it continues, the more entire is the ascendant which it gains over us.]

Through the preaching of the Prophets, however, these difficulties were overcome—

[The prophet Haggai justly reproved them for attending so carefully to their own accommodation, whilst the Temple and the service of their God were altogether forgotten; and bade them carefully to "consider their ways[e]." The prophet Zechariah also urged them to bear in mind how awfully their fathers had suffered for their neglect of God[f]; and then, by a variety of images which he had seen in visions, encouraged them with assurances of success in their labours[g]. Thus were the people stimulated to exertion. But behold, no sooner did they resume their work, than their enemies renewed their application to the Government to renew their mandate to discontinue it[h]. Whilst they were occupied only in building ceiled houses for themselves, no notice was taken of it: but as soon as they began to serve their God, their enemies were up in arms. And so it always is; zeal is approved in every thing except religion: but, as soon as ever it discovers itself in that, every effort will be made to repress it. This effort, however, was overruled, as similar efforts have often been, for the furtherance of the work it was intended to destroy[i]: and in the short space of four years the edifice was completed[k].]

The history thus viewed leads us naturally to notice,

II. The

[c] Ch. iv. 14. [d] ib. ver. 23, 24. [e] Hagg. i. 2—5, 7.
[f] Zech. i. 1—6.
[g] Read attentively the four first chapters of Zechariah *in this particular view.* [h] Ch. v. 1—10.
[i] Compare Ch. vi. 1—10. with Phil. i. 12. [k] ver. 15.

II. The subserviency of a faithful Ministry to the erection of God's spiritual temple—

The Temple of old was a shadow of that spiritual temple which is erected for God in the hearts of men; "being built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, and Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone[l]." The erection of this,

1. Is attended with the same difficulties—

[Who that begins truly to surrender up his soul to God, does not find many impediments from *pretended friends?* They will profess to approve of religion, and will propose to go with us to a certain length, that so they may have the greater influence to keep us from "following the Lord fully," and from serving him with our *whole* hearts——— If we are enabled to withstand their efforts, then we shall be assailed by *open enemies,* who will accuse us of evil designs against both the Church and State; and will call forth the power of the Civil Magistrate, or of our more immediate governors, to suppress our zeal. Not unfrequently will they become our greatest foes, who by their relation to us ought rather to become our firmest protectors——— And too often do *timidity and sloth* induce us to relax our efforts, till, if God do not by some special act of providence or grace awaken us, we lose the time for working, and, like the foolish virgins, experience for ever the fatal effects of our remissness——— But the work of God in the soul]

2. Is carried on and perfected by the same means—

[God has established an order of men *on purpose to carry on this spiritual building* in the world[m]. Paul and the other Apostles may be called "master-builders[n];" but every Pastor and Teacher is engaged in the same work, according to the peculiar office that has been assigned him. "To impart to you some spiritual gift, to the end that ye may be established," and "to perfect that which is lacking in your faith," and in every way to be "helpers of your joy," is the great end of all our Ministerial labours: and, if we would labour with effect, we must use the very same means as Haggai and Zechariah did.

We call you then, Brethren, to "consider your ways:" consider what has hindered you hitherto; and what has been the consequence of intermitting your exertions in the service of your God. Have you not reason to blush and be confounded for the little progress that you have made in the Divine life?——— Consider too, as Zechariah so largely recommends, the promises of God. What assurances of success are given you by your gracious

[l] Eph. ii. 20—22. [m] Eph. iv. 11—13. [n] 1 Cor. iii. 10.

cious God, if only you will put your hands to the work in good earnest——— "Up then, and be doing," every one of you; and "your God will be with you." Yield not to discouragements of any kind; for "greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world." And beware how you give way to carnal ease and indolence: surely it ill becomes you to be so intent, as most of us are, on earthly things, whilst the spiritual edifice advances so slowly. Let all inquire, what yet remains to be done in their own hearts, and, what may be done for God in the world at large: and let us, by "coming daily and hourly to Christ as the living foundation-stone, seek, as living stones, to be built up a spiritual House[o]," that shall be "the habitation of God, through the Spirit," for ever and ever.]

[o] 1 Pet. ii. 4, 5.

CCXCVI.

EZRA'S HUMILIATION FOR THE SINS OF HIS PEOPLE.

Ezra ix. 5, 6. *And at the evening sacrifice I arose up from my heaviness; and, having rent my garments and my mantle, I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the Lord my God, and said, O my God! I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face unto thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens.*

IT is common both for individuals and Churches to appear hopeful before men, when a nearer acquaintance with them would furnish us with abundant cause of grief and shame. At Ezra's coming to Jerusalem, about fourscore years after the Babylonish Captivity, he found the Temple built, and the ordinances of religion statedly performed. But on inquiring more particularly into the state of those who now inhabited the Holy Land, he received such information as filled him with the deepest anguish.

We propose to consider,

I. The reason of his sorrow—

Many of the people had connected themselves in marriage both with the Canaanites and other heathens around them. This he justly regarded as a most heinous evil,

1. As

1. As being a violation of an express command—

[Ezra himself speaks of it in this view[a]. It is possible that, whilst the generality sought only the gratification of their own corrupt appetites, "the princes and rulers, who were chief in this matter," justified their conduct on the ground of policy. They might urge, that, being few in number, it was desirable, for their own preservation, to make alliances with those whose hostility they feared. It is certain that in this way many set their own reasonings in opposition to God's revealed will. But reason is altogether out of its place on such occasions. God's authority is not to be trampled on by us: we are not at liberty to sit in judgment on his commands, and to determine how far it is expedient to obey them: when once we are told, "Thus saith the Lord," we have no option, no alternative left: a cheerful and unreserved compliance is our bounden duty, and our highest wisdom.]

2. As having an evident tendency to bring the people back to idolatry—

[It was for their idolatries more especially that the nation had been sent into captivity; and a recurrence of the same evils was most likely to result from so intimate a connexion with idolaters. This danger had been particularly pointed out, when the prohibition had been originally given[b]: and their disregard of this danger shewed how little they had profited by the judgments that had been inflicted on them, or the mercies that had been vouchsafed unto them. But thus it is with all who seek the friendship of the world: God has told them, that "friendship with the world is enmity with God[c];" that it is impossible to maintain communion with both[d]; and that therefore all who cultivate the friendship of the world will be regarded and treated as the enemies of God[e]: yet they will run the risk, and for the sake of gratifying their corrupt wishes, will endanger the everlasting salvation of their souls. O that those who are inclined to take worldly persons for their associates, and especially those who are tempted to unite with them in the indissoluble bonds of marriage, would consider the guilt and danger of such measures, ere they bring upon themselves the wrath of an offended God! If only they would look around them and see the injury which others have sustained in their souls by such conduct, they would pause, and not venture to purchase any fancied good at so great a price.]

How great his sorrow on this occasion was, we may judge from,

II. The

[a] ver. 10—12. compared with Deut. vii. 2, 3.
[b] ib. ver. 4.
[c] Jam. iv. 4.
[d] Matt. vi. 24. & 2 Cor. vi. 14, 15.
[e] 1 John ii. 15—17.

II. The expressions of it—

That which first calls for our notice is, the expression of his grief the instant he was informed of their misconduct—

[This was more violent than any of which we read in the holy Scriptures. Often have men rent their mantle and their garments; but of him alone are we told that "he plucked off the hair of his head and of his beard." In the first paroxysm of his grief he was almost distracted; yea, he was so overwhelmed as to be incapable of speech or action: hence "he sat down astonied," as one altogether stupified through excess of sorrow. And shall we think all this extravagant? No truly, if we duly estimate the evil they had committed, and the danger to which the whole nation was reduced[f]. We are told of David, that "horror took hold upon him," and that "rivers of tears ran down his cheeks, because of those who kept not God's law:" and St. Paul appeals to God himself, that he had "great sorrow and continual heaviness in his heart for his brethren's sake[g]." We may be sure therefore that the grief which Ezra manifested was no more than what the occasion called for.]

But his humiliation before God is that which more particularly demands our attention—

["At the time of the evening sacrifice," as if revived and encouraged by the consideration of the great atonement, "he arose from his heaviness, and fell upon his knees, and spread out his hands unto the Lord his God," and confessed with shame and anguish of heart both his own sins and the sins of all the people. What a just view had he of national transgressions! Many would have thought, that, because he disapproved of the evils that had been committed, he had no share in the guilt contracted by them, nor any occasion to humble himself before God on account of them: but the members of the body politic are, in their corporate capacity, like the members of the natural body, all to a certain degree responsible for those evils, which generally, though not universally, prevail among them. At the day of judgment indeed, none will have to answer for any thing but what they themselves were personally guilty of; but in this world, where alone nations can be dealt with as nations, we should consider ourselves as participating in whatever relates to the nation at large.

And here we cannot but admire the humility with which he confessed the sins of the nation before God, and the fervor with which he implored the forgiveness of them. O that we felt even for our own sins, as he felt for the sins of others! However "fools

[f] ver. 14. [g] Rom. ix. 1—3.

"fools may make a mock at it," sin is no light evil: there is no contrition too deep for us to feel on account of sin, nor any earnestness too great to use in order to obtain the remission of it. Let the view then of this holy man put us all to shame: let us blush and be confounded at the thought that our repentance from day to day is so cold and superficial; and let us tremble for ourselves, lest we be found at last to have been hypocrites and dissemblers with God. We are told plainly enough what is that repentance which godly sorrow will produce[h]: let us therefore look to it that we "approve ourselves to be clear in this matter."]

APPLICATION—

[And now, methinks, the evening sacrifice is just offered: "now once, in the end of the world, hath Christ appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself[i]." O let our eyes be fixed on that "Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world!" Let us spread before him both our national and personal transgressions; and let us lay them all on the head of that heavenly victim; not doubting but that, "if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness[k]."]

[h] 2 Cor. vii. 10, 11. [i] Heb. ix. 26. [k] 1 John i. 9.

CCXCVII.

USE OF GOD'S DIVERSIFIED DISPENSATIONS.

Ezra ix. 13, 14. *After all that is come upon us for our evil deeds, and for our great trespass, seeing that thou our God hast punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and hast given us such deliverance as this; should we again break thy commandments?*

THE intention of God in all his dispensations, whether of providence or of grace, is to deter men from sin: and it becomes all his people to co-operate with him in this important work. Rulers in particular are invested with power by God himself for this very end: nor do they ever appear to more advantage than when they exert themselves to the uttermost in the support of God's authority, and in promoting the best interests of those over whom they are placed.

Ezra,

Ezra, perhaps about eighty years after the return of the Jews from Babylon, was permitted by Artaxerxes king of Persia to go and visit his brethren in Judea, and was empowered by him to rectify all abuses that he might find among them. After his arrival, he heard, to his unspeakable grief, that many of them had joined in marriage with heathen women. He therefore humbled himself before God on their account; and looking back upon all that they had suffered for their iniquities, and on the marvellous deliverance which God had vouchsafed unto them, he expressed his surprise, his horror, his indignation at their great impiety.

From his words we shall take occasion to consider,

I. God's diversified dispensations towards us—

God visited his people of old with alternate mercies and judgments: and thus he has dealt with *us* also.

He has visited our sins with judgments—

[The judgments which we have of late experienced, have been exceeding heavy[a] — — — And it is of the utmost importance that we should acknowledge the hand of God in them. They spring not out of the dust: they arise not *merely* from the ambition of our enemies, or the errors of our own Government. God uses men as instruments, just as he did the Assyrians and Chaldeans, to punish his people: but still it is His hand alone that inflicts the stroke[b]: and, if we do not trace his displeasure in all that we have suffered, it is not possible that we should ever make a proper improvement of it.

We must confess, however, that our sufferings have by no means equalled our deserts[c]. Take any *one* of our national sins[d], and it might well bring down upon us all that we have endured. If God had proceeded against us according to the tremendous aggregate of our iniquities, we should have been made as Sodom and Gomorrah.]

He has now also vouchsafed us a deliverance—

[The "deliverance" granted to the Jews in their return from

[a] Here particulars should be mentioned.

[b] Ps. xvii. 13. Isai. x. 5—7, 13—15. & xxxvii. 24—26. Gen. xlv. 8.

[c] Ps. ciii. 10.

[d] Our contempt of the Gospel, our open profaneness, our traffic in human blood, &c.

from Babylon, was not inferior to that which they had formerly experienced in their departure from Egypt. And has not ours also been exceeding great[e]? ——— In this too must we view the hand of God. Whoever were *the means*, God was *the author* of it. It is he who produces all the changes that arise in the state of individuals[f], or of kingdoms[g]. And as the discerning of his agency in our afflictions is necessary to effect our humiliation, so the beholding of it in our[*] mercies is necessary to excite our gratitude.]

To promote a suitable improvement of these dispensations, let us consider,

II. The effect they should have upon us—

If the destruction of sin be the end which God proposes to himself in all his conduct towards us, then we should endeavour to make every thing subservient to that end. The pointed interrogation in the text strongly shews in what light we should view a renewed violation of God's commandments, after he has taken such pains to enforce the observance of them.

1. How *unreasonable* would it be!

[No man can read the account of Pharaoh's obstinacy in the midst of all his successive judgments and deliverances, and not stand amazed at his more than brutish stupidity. Yet it is precisely thus that we shall act, if we do not now put away our sins, and submit ourselves entirely to God's revealed will. And how unreasonable, or rather we should say irrational, such conduct would be, God himself tells us: he even calls heaven and earth to express their astonishment at it, as not only levelling us with the beasts, but reducing us to a state far below them[h]. And if we be guilty of it, he will justly vent his indignation against us, as he did against his people of old; "They are a perverse and crooked generation. Do ye thus requite the Lord? O foolish people, and unwise[i]!"

2. How ungrateful!

[Ingratitude is considered as one of the greatest aggravations that can be found in any offence of man against his fellow man: and how much more must it enhance the guilt we contract in our disobedience to God! See what stress God himself lays upon

[*] Here it should be set forth.
[e] Jer. xviii. 6, 7, 9.
[f] 1 Sam. ii. 6—8.
[g] Isai. i. 2, 3.
[h] Deut. xxxii. 5, 6.

upon this in the transgressions of David[k], and Solomon[l], and Hezekiah[m]; and will it not stamp a ten-fold malignity also on our offences[n]?]

3. How dangerous!

[This is particularly noticed by Ezra, in the words following the text: and the state of the Jews at this moment is an awful comment upon it. We are yet in the hands of our God; and if we still rebel against him, he can easily bring again upon us the calamities which he has just removed, or send others far more afflictive. He tells us, that, as the impenitence of the Jews was the reason of his continuing to afflict them[o], so he will "punish us seven times more for our sins[p]," if we now continue in them. To what a state of misery and dereliction we may in that case expect to be reduced, we may judge from what was actually experienced by the Jewish nation[q]. But the Lord grant that we may not so provoke the Majesty of heaven!]

ADDRESS—

[Remember that God is not an indifferent spectator of our conduct. Sin is "that abominable thing which his soul hateth[r]:" and he will surely destroy either it, or him that retains it. And if his judgments be not inflicted on the sinner in this life, there still is a future day of retribution, when every man shall give account of himself to God, and receive the just recompence of all his actions.

Let this then be the improvement which we determine, through grace, to make of God's present dispensations. Let us reflect upon them as means of exciting us to holy obedience; and let every one of us shudder at the thought of ever again breaking the least of God's commandments.]

[k] 2 Sam. xii. 7—9. [l] 1 Kin. xi. 9. [m] 2 Chron. xxxii. 25.
[n] See what construction God himself puts upon such conduct, Jer. vii. 9, 10. [o] Isai. ix. 12, 17, 21. & x. 4.
[p] Lev. xxvi. 18, 21, 24, 28. [q] Judg. x. 11—14.
[r] Jer. xliv. 4.

CCXCVIII.

THE EFFICACY OF ZEAL AND DILIGENCE.

Neh. iv. 6. *The people had a mind to work.*

GREAT and useful undertakings are often declined, from an idea that we are not able to carry them into effect, when, in fact, nothing is wanting to insure success in them, but zeal and diligence.

The

The history before us strongly exemplifies this remark. The walls of Jerusalem still continued in their desolate condition, notwithstanding the Jews had returned thither about ninety years: but, at the instigation of one single man, the people combined; and engaging heartily in the work, they effected in a short space of time what had appeared utterly impracticable: Nehemiah says, "So built we the wall; for the people had a mind to work."

Let us consider,

I. The reason assigned for their success—

The work which the people had to perform was attended with many difficulties—

[The removal of the rubbish[a] was of itself no inconsiderable labour, considering how few hands there were to engage in it. But beside this, the enemies of the Jews exerted themselves by ridicule, by menaces, and by various other devices[b], to discourage the undertaking, and to prevent the execution of it. The treachery and supineness of some among the Jews themselves[c] formed also a very formidable obstacle in the way of those who desired to accomplish the work.]

But by zeal and diligence they were enabled to accomplish it with incredible dispatch—

[Arduous as the work was, it was all finished in two and fifty days[d]. But how was it effected so soon? We are told, in the text; "The people had a mind to the work:" every one engaged in it with his whole heart: they regarded neither fatigue nor danger: they would not so much as take off their clothes during the whole time, except for the sake of cleanliness[e]; and they wore their swords by their side while they wrought with their hands[f], that they might be ready to resist their enemies in case of an attack. By this union of courageous zeal and unremitting diligence they effected their purpose, to the astonishment and confusion of all their enemies[g].]

To shew that this subject is capable of very useful improvement, we shall notice,

II. The instruction we may gather from it—

There are two truths that may justly be deduced from this history;

1. In

[a] ver. 2. [b] Ch. ii. 10, 19. & ver. 1, 3, 7, 8. & Ch. vi. 8, 9.
[c] ver. 10, 12. & Ch. vi. 18, 19.
[d] Ch. vi. 15. [e] ver. 23. [f] ver. 16—18. [g] Ch. vi. 16.

1. In every thing we have to do for God, zeal and diligence are necessary—

[The Jews at that time were actuated by a religious zeal, and exerted themselves for God[h]. And the work which we have to do for God is by no means dissimilar, if only we consider what a typical aspect there was in the whole of their captivity and restoration[i]. We may at least be permitted to *accommodate* this subject to the reparation of the soul for God, after the desolations it has suffered through the incursions of sin. We see that year after year the souls of men lie in ruins; that the generality have no heart to seek their restoration to their primitive grandeur; and that the greater part of those who begin to labour in this work, make little progress. But to what is this owing? The truth is, "they have no mind to the work:" they do not *love* their work: repentance is a burthen: prayer is a task: self-denial is a drudgery: they would rather be excused from every part of their duty: they would not think of communion with God, or of conformity to his image, if they were not driven to it by an imperious necessity, a fear of everlasting torments. Hence their exertions are weak and intermitted; and their enemies are suffered to pull down their work, as fast as *they* build it up: so that, after an interval of months and years, little, if any, progress is made in their work. Ah! think of this, ye who are complaining of the low state of your souls! It would have been thus with respect to the walls of Jerusalem, if the people had been as lukewarm as you: but "they had a mind to work;" and so must you, if you would do any thing with effect: "Whatever your hand findeth to do, you must do it with your might[k]."]

2. In every thing we have to do for God, zeal and diligence will insure success—

[In the work of our souls we have to encounter difficulties not unlike to those which the Jews had to cope with; we have much rubbish to be removed, many reproaches and menaces to withstand, and many discouragements from weak or false brethren to surmount. But we need not fear: if we engage heartily in our work, we shall assuredly succeed. Nothing shall be able to obstruct our progress: yea, the opposition we meet with shall but inflame our ardor, and increase our energy; and we shall proceed triumphantly, in spite of the assaults either of men or devils. We do not mean to say, that our own arm can effect these things: we know full well that it cannot; and that, of ourselves, we cannot do any thing that is good: but if we go forth with zeal and diligence in a humble dependence upon God, he will

[h] Ch. ii. 17, 18. [i] See Isai. xl. 2. & lii. 9, 10. & lxv. 18.
[k] Eccl. ix. 10.

will enable us to fulfil his will; yea, "through His strength we shall be able to do all things[l]." He is pledged to assist those who trust in him[m]; and the weakest that relies on him shall be "more than conqueror:" yea, the weaker we are in ourselves, the more shall "his strength be perfected in our weakness[n]." Let us but trust in him, and "the wall shall be built, though in troublous times[o];" and "what has been begun in grace shall soon be perfected in glory[p]."]

ADDRESS—

1. Those who make excuses for not engaging in the work of their souls—

[The generality are saying, "The time for the Lord's work is not yet come[q]." But whatever excuses men urge for their delay, the true and only reason of it is, "They have no mind to the work." Be assured, my Brethren, that when God shall call you into judgment, the veil with which you cover your hypocrisy will be found thinner than the spider's web. Rest not then any longer in such dangerous delusions; but arise, and set yourselves to the work without delay.]

2. To those who have entered on the Lord's work—

[To exert yourselves with effect, there is need not only of individual zeal, but also of general and cordial co-operation. The builders all had their proper work assigned them: and of some it is said, "They built before their own houses[r]:" and though the work seemed but ill adapted for females, some wrought in "concert with their daughters[s]." How prosperous would our exertions be, if we would imitate them in these respects! See, Beloved, what work you have to do near your own houses. If all who profess to be engaged in this good work would attend diligently to their children, their servants, their dependents; if they would visit their sick neighbours, and labour to instruct those to whom they can gain easy and familiar access; methinks the wall would soon be built, to the admiration of men, and the confusion of devils. Let there then be a general zeal amongst you, and a determination to co-operate in every labour of love. It is mentioned to the disgrace of the nobles, that "they put not their necks to the work of the Lord[t]." O let there not be any such amongst you! Rather, let the example of Nehemiah and his followers animate us all: then shall the work proceed rapidly around us, and our "Jerusalem shall soon become a praise in the earth[u]."]

[l] Phil. iv. 13.
[m] Ps. cxxv. 1.
[n] 2 Cor. xii. 9.
[o] Dan. ix. 25.
[p] Phil. i. 6.
[q] Hag. i. 2.
[r] Ch. iii. 28—30.
[s] Ch. iii. 12.
[t] Ch. iii. 5.
[u] Isai. lxii. 7.

CCXCIX.

THE EXPEDITION WITH WHICH THE WALL OF JERUSALEM WAS BUILT.

Neh. vi. 15. *So the wall was finished — — — in fifty and two days.*

A MERE historic record of the time occupied in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem appears at first sight to be an uninteresting subject for a popular discourse: but it will be found replete with interest, when the circumstances connected with it are taken into the account. The extremely dilapidated and ruined state of the fortifications at that time, the weakness and poverty of those who undertook to rebuild them, and the opposition which they met with from numerous and potent enemies, combine to render the record in our text almost incredible. For the completion of such a work, two and fifty *weeks* would have been a very short time; but two and fifty *days* seem utterly insufficient for it: such expedition appears perfectly beyond the physical powers of the persons engaged in it: yet in that time the wall was finished: and it will be very profitable to inquire,

I. How it was completed in so short a time—

To enter fully into the subject, the six first chapters of this book should be carefully read. In them we shall find that the means whereby this great work was accomplished, were,

1. The wisdom and energy of the Governor—

[In every step which Nehemiah took, we are struck with his consummate *wisdom*. When first he made known to the Persian Monarch his desire to undertake the work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, he kept out of sight every consideration which might tend to create jealousy in the monarch's mind, and mentioned only such as were likely to produce in him a favourable impression. With this view he speaks of Jerusalem, not as the city of the great God, which had been so great and powerful in former times, and was yet ordained of God to become the capital of an independent nation, but simply, as "the city of his father's sepulchres[a]."

Having

[a] Ch. ii. 5.

Having obtained permission to execute his purpose, and come to Jerusalem for that end, he again shewed his wisdom in concealing, from the people the reason of his journey, till he had personally himself inspected the walls, and was thereby qualified to obviate all objections which indifference or despondency might suggest[b].

The way in which he counteracted all the plots of his enemies, still farther marked the depth and solidity of his judgment. He forbore to use any irritating expressions, notwithstanding the multiplied provocations which he met with: and whilst his enemies wasted their time in plotting how to arrest his progress, he occupied himself in the prosecution of his work, augmenting his exertions in proportion as they increased their efforts to impede him[c]. Yet it is worthy of particular observation, that he neither trusted to his own exertions, nor yet neglected them under an idea that he should be protected by his God: but he combined a dependence on God with a diligent use of all proper means of self-defence[d]; thereby setting us an example which we shall do well to follow in every difficulty which we may be called to encounter.

Nor was *the energy* of Nehemiah less admirable than his wisdom: we see throughout the whole of his conduct as much promptitude as consisted with sound discretion, and an invincible firmness in executing whatever his deliberate judgment had dictated. So intent was he on the prosecution of his purpose, that neither he, nor those under his immediate influence, ever put off their clothes for several weeks together, except for the purpose of their being washed[e]. And when a proposal was made to him to hold a conference with some adversaries in an adjacent village, his reply was, "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you[f]?" Yea, when the same message was sent four times, he repeated the same answer: and when at the fifth time it was accompanied with a letter containing many accusations against him, he contented himself with exposing the falsehood of them, and more determinately than ever besought the Lord to strengthen his hands for the work in which he was engaged[g].

On the failure of that device, his enemies sought to intimidate him by reports of a conspiracy against his life, and advised him to take refuge in the Temple: but he, with a fortitude worthy of his high character, answered, "Should such a man as I flee? And who is there that, being as I am, would go into the Temple to save his life? I will not go in[h]." It is in connexion with this anecdote that our text informs us, "*So* the wall was built in fifty and two days:" and certainly to this extraordinary combination

[b] Ch. ii. 12—18.
[c] Ch. ii. 19, 20. & iv. 8, 9, 13, 14.
[d] Ch. iv. 9.
[e] ib. ver. 23.
[f] Ch. vi. 2, 3.
[g] ib. ver. 5—9.
[h] ib. ver. 10, 11.

nation of wisdom and energy in him we must ascribe it, that the wall was erected in so short a time.]

2. The union and perseverance of the people—

[An individual, however good and great, can do little, unless he is seconded by those who are under his direction: but in this case Nehemiah found instruments well fitted to his hands. No sooner did he make known to the Rulers of Jerusalem the commission which he had received from the king of Persia, and call for their assistance in the execution of it, than they said, "Let us rise up and build;" and "immediately they strengthened their hands for this good work[i]."

It is true, there were some exceptions, some who were too proud and fond of ease to work[j]; and others, who yielded to despondency[k]; and others who actually carried on a treasonable correspondence with Nehemiah's most inveterate enemies[l]: but, on the other hand, there was such a zeal amongst the great mass of the people, that some performed double the work allotted them[m], and even ladies of the highest rank combined their utmost efforts to assist in building the wall, not accounting any service either derogatory to their honour, or unsuited to their sex, if they might but encourage their brethren, and advance the glory of their God[n]. And to this *union* is the success expressly ascribed: "So built we the wall; for the people had a mind to the work[o]."

There was also among them astonishing *perseverance:* for when they were menaced with a sudden assault, and were told ten times over, that an armed host would come suddenly upon them to destroy them, they persisted resolutely in their work, arming themselves for their defence, setting alternate watches for their preservation, and working with a trowel, as it were, in the one hand, and a sword in the other, determining rather to sacrifice their lives, than be deterred from the service in which they had embarked[p]. Had they yielded to indolence or fear, the work could never have been carried forward: but by this zealous co-operation of all ranks and orders among them, all difficulties were overcome, and the wall was built with an expedition almost incredible.]

3. The peculiar blessing of their God—

[To this above all must the success be ultimately ascribed; for to this were owing the desire of Nehemiah to rebuild the wall[q], the consent of Artaxerxes to the plan proposed[r], the wisdom and energy with which Nehemiah was inspired[s], the cordial co-operation

[i] Ch. ii. 17—19. [j] Ch. iii. 5. [k] Ch. iv. 10.
[l] Ch. vi. 17—19. [m] Ch. iii. 5, 27. [n] ib. ver. 12.
[o] Ch. iv. 6. [p] ib. ver. 11—13, 16—18, 21.
[q] Ch. ii. 12. [r] Ch. i. 11. with ii. 4, 8. [s] Ch. ii. 18.

co-operation of so many people, and the defeating of all the plots which were devised to retard the work[t]. Even the very enemies themselves were so convinced that the work exceeded all the power of man, that they were constrained to acknowledge God himself as the author of it[u], since none but God could have carried them through such labours, or delivered them from such perils, or given a successful issue to such hopeless exertions.

It is of infinite importance that we notice this; for otherwise we shall be ready to give to the creature the honour that is due to God only. Throughout the whole work, application was made to God for his direction and blessing: it was not undertaken without prayer[x], nor carried on without prayer[y]: but a reliance was placed on God as an all-sufficient Helper[z]; and he shewed himself worthy of the confidence reposed on him: he shewed that "none who trust in Him shall ever be confounded."]

Having thus traced Nehemiah's success to its true cause, we proceed to set before you,

II. The great lesson which we are to learn from it—

We might with great propriety direct your attention to those wonderful events which occupy the attention of the public at the present hour[a]: for certainly, whether we consider the union which has been produced amongst all the Allied Powers, or the wisdom and energy with which their efforts have been combined, or the rapid and complete success with which their labours have been crowned, there never was an occurrence which more strongly marked the hand of God, or more strictly corresponded with that which we have been considering, than that which we now commemorate, the re-establishment of peace amongst all the Powers of Europe. We may almost literally say, in reference to it, "The wall has been built in fifty and two days."

But we will direct your attention rather to that which will be of importance, not to the present age only, but to all people to the end of time.

Behold then *in what way we should all engage in the Lord's work*—

[To

[t] Ch. iv. 15. [u] Ch. iv. 1—3. with vi. 16. [x] Ch. i. 4—11.
[y] Ch. ii. 4. & iv. 4, 5. ib. 9. & vi. 9, 14. [z] Ch. ii. 20.
[a] June 23, 1814, a day or two after peace had been proclaimed.

[To every man in the universe is a work assigned, namely, To erect an house that shall be an everlasting habitation for our God. The walls of Jerusalem reduced to heaps of rubbish do but faintly represent the desperate state of the world around us; whilst the number and malice of those who obstructed the rebuilding of that wall give us a very inadequate idea of the enemies with whom we have to contend whilst executing the work which God has given us to do. Every one indeed must *begin at home*, and *work before his own door*[b]; for it is by getting the work of God advanced in our own souls that we shall best contribute to the good of the Church around us. But in the whole of our work we must cultivate *wisdom*. It is lamentable to reflect how often men defeat their own purposes by not attending to the counsels of wisdom. Many give great advantage to their adversaries by not considering what is the peculiar line of conduct which the particular time and circumstances call for, and how they may best overcome the difficulties with which they are surrounded. We are told to "walk in wisdom towards them that are without," and to unite "the wisdom of the serpent with the harmlessness of the dove:" and it is of absolute and indispensable necessity that we attend to these directions, if we would walk honourably before God ourselves, or be instrumental to the advancing of his work in the souls of others — — —

But to wisdom we must add *energy*. There is no time to be lost: "Whatever our hand findeth to do, we must do it with all our might." We must be "fervent in spirit whilst serving the Lord:" and, if any one would divert us from our purpose, or tempt us to relax our diligence, we must make this our uniform and steady answer, "I am doing a great work, and cannot come down" — — —

In this kind of conduct there should be an *union* amongst us all; Ministers and people should all work together: yea, and women also should engage in the good work; for they, in their place and station, may be as helpful as any. Even the Apostles owed much to the labours of women[c]; and the most eminent Ministers have been helped forward by their pious and well regulated zeal[d]. Let all of us then be of one heart and one mind in relation to this great matter; for it is surprising how much more rapidly the work of God advances in the souls of men, where many are engaged in strengthening each other's hands, and in encouraging one another's hearts. There are a thousand works which may be carried on in concert, which an insulated individual can never accomplish: and whoever engages in such works for the good of others, will find that he himself is the most profited by his own exertions: "Whilst watering others, his own soul will be watered" also — — —

Nor

[b] Ch. iii. 10, 23, 28, 30. [c] Rom. xvi. 1—4, 12.
[d] Acts xviii. 26.

Nor must we draw back through fear or weariness. We must be men of *fortitude and self-denial.* We should scarcely find time, as it were, for relaxation, any further than absolute necessity requires: and if menaced with assaults, we should put on the panoply of God, and stand ready for the contest: and if by a temporary desertion of our post we may even preserve our lives, we should be willing rather to lay down our lives than dishonour our God by cowardice in his service——— "Should such a man as I flee?" must be our answer to every suggestion of our great adversary, and to every unbelieving fear that may arise in our own hearts———

But above all, we must go forward in *dependence on God.* He must teach us, and guide us, and prosper us, in all our way. "Without him we can do nothing:" but, on the other hand, "through Christ strengthening us we can do all things." We need despond on account of the greatness of the work, nor be discouraged through the number and malignity of our enemies: "if God be for us, none can effectually be against us:" "He will perfect that which concerneth us," and "carry on to the end the work he has begun." If only we "be stedfast, immoveable, and always abounding in the work of the Lord, he has pledged himself to us, that our labour shall not be in vain in the Lord"———]

CCC.

EFFECT OF EZRA'S PREACHING.

Neh. viii. 5, 6. *And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people (for he was above all the people); and when he opened it, all the people stood up: and Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God; and all the people answered, Amen, amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.*

THOUGH in the time of our Lord it was the custom to read the law of God in the synagogues, it does not appear to have been any regular part of the priest's office to preach unto the people. On some occasions however we find persons sent through the land of Israel to make known the law; and here we behold Ezra, on a pulpit of wood, elevated above the people, and surrounded by an immense congregation, who had come together on purpose to hear the word of God expounded to them. Since the introduction

introduction of Christianity, the preaching of the Gospel to men has been the particular office assigned to men who are set apart for that purpose: and though we must chiefly look to the Apostles as our examples, and to the effects of their ministrations as the pattern of what we may expect to see amongst our auditors, yet may we profitably look back to the time of Ezra to learn from him and his ministry,

I. In what manner the word of God should be *dispensed*—

The mode adopted by Ezra, namely the expounding of Scripture[a], we conceive to be peculiarly worthy of imitation. It is indeed but little practised at the present time, though at the time of the Reformation it generally obtained: and it has very great advantages above the plan which has superseded it.

1. It leads the people into a better acquaintance with the Scriptures—

[The Scriptures, except as a book for children, are but little read: persons are discouraged from perusing them by an idea that they are unintelligible to common capacities. But a very little explanation would render them, for the most part, easy to be understood by all. And what a vast advantage would this be! The people studying the word of God at home would be abundantly better qualified to understand it when read in public; and the explanations given to them in public, would enable them to study it to better purpose at home: whereas the present plan of taking only a small passage for a motto, or merely as a groundwork for some general observation, leads to an extreme neglect of the Holy Scriptures, and to a consequent ignorance of them among all classes of the community.]

2. It brings every part of the Sacred Records into view—

[There are some who bring forward the doctrinal part of Scripture exclusively, and leave the practical part entirely out of sight: there are others who insist only on the practical parts, and leave out the doctrinal. There are some also to whom many of the doctrines contained in the Sacred Volume are perfectly hateful; and who never in all their lives so much as mentioned the doctrines of predestination and election, but to explain them away, and to abuse the persons who maintained them. But by expounding

[a] ver. 8.

expounding whole books of Scripture, every doctrine must be noticed in its turn, and the connexion between them and our practice must be pointed out. True it is, that this mode of preaching would not altogether exclude false doctrine; but it would render the establishment of errors more difficult, because the hearers would be able to judge, in some good measure, how far the true and legitimate sense of Scripture was given, and how far it was perverted. The benefit of this therefore cannot be too highly appreciated.]

3. It brings home truth to the conscience with more authority—

[The word of man, though true, has little weight, in comparison of the word of God: "*that* is quick and powerful, and sharper than a two-edged sword." It is inconceivable what an advantage a preacher has, when he can say, "Thus saith THE LORD:" then every doctrine demands the obedience of faith, and every precept the obedience of righteousness. When told that the word which is delivered to them will judge them in the last day, the people will not dare to trifle with it, as they will with the declarations of fallible men. Were this matter more attentively considered, we have no doubt but that more frequent appeals would be made to Scripture in our public harangues; and that the obsolete method of expounding Scripture would have at least some measure of that attention which it deserves[b].]

But, in considering the word of God as explained to the people of Jerusalem, we are more particularly led to notice,

II. In what manner it should be *heard*—

Truly admirable was the conduct of the people on this occasion. Observe,

1. Their reverential awe—

[When Ezra opened the book of God, all the people, in token of their reverence, stood up: and when he blessed God for giving them so rich a treasure, they "all with uplifted hands cried, Amen, amen;" yea, "they bowed their heads also, and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground." This was a deportment which became sinners in the presence of their God: they did not look to the creature, but to God, whose voice they heard, and whose authority they acknowledged, in every word that was spoken. What a contrast does this form with the manner in which the word of God is heard amongst us! How rarely

[b] This part of the subject, *as addressed to Ministers*, is deserving of much fuller notice, than it could receive as addressed to a common congregation.

rarely do we find persons duly impressed with a sense of their obligation to God for giving them a revelation of his will! How rarely do men at this day look through the preacher unto God, and hear *God* speaking to them by the voice of his servants! Even religious people are far from attending the ministration of the word in the spirit and temper that they ought: curiosity, fondness for novelties, and attachment to some particular preacher too often supply the place of those better feelings by which men ought to be actuated in their attendance on the preached Gospel. To "stand in awe of God's word," and "to tremble at it," are far more suitable emotions, than those which we usually see around us. The Lord grant, that our duty in this respect may be more justly estimated, and more generally performed!]

2. Their devout affections—

["When the people heard the words of the law, they all wept," as feeling that they had sinned greatly against it[c]. And, when they were reminded, that, as the design of the present feast was to bring to their view the tender mercies of their God, and to encourage them to expect all manner of blessings at his hands, they ought rather to rejoice[d], they did rejoice, insomuch that "there was very great gladness" amongst them[e]: and they rejoiced especially on this account, that "they had understood the words that had been declared unto them[f]." Now it is in this way that we should hear the word delivered to us. When it shews us our sins, we should weep, as it were in dust and ashes: and when it sets forth the exceeding great and precious promises of the Gospel, we should rejoice, yea, "rejoice with joy unspeakable and glorified." We should have our hearts rightly attuned, so that we should never want a string to vibrate to every touch of God's blessed word. But may it not be said to the generality in the present day, "We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented?" Yes; the Gospel has little more power over the affections of men than if it were "a cunningly devised fable." But we intreat you to consider, that, if the law, when expounded, was so powerful, much more should the Gospel be, since "it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth."]

3. Their unreserved obedience—

[No sooner was it discovered that an ordinance, appointed by Moses, had been neglected, than they hastened to observe it according to the strict letter of the law, and actually did observe it with greater fidelity than it ever had been observed even from the days of Joshua to that present hour[g]. This shewed, that the

[c] ver. 9. [d] ver. 10, 11. [e] ver. 17.
[f] ver. 12. [g] ver. 13—18.

the impression made on their affections was deep and spiritual. And it is in this way that we also must improve the ministration of the word. If we attend to the Gospel as we ought to do, we shall find out many things which we have neglected, and many that we have done amiss: yea, many things which are not generally noticed even among the godly, will occur to our minds, and shew us the defectiveness, not of our obedience only, but of the obedience of the best of men. Let us have our minds then open to conviction, and attentive to every commandment of our God. Nor let us be satisfied with paying only a customary attention to his revealed will, but let us aspire after higher degrees of purity, and a more perfect conformity to the Divine image. This will serve as the best test of our sincerity, and it will shew, that neither have you heard in vain, nor we dispensed his word in vain.]

CCCI.

THE FEAST OF PURIM.

Esther ix. 27, 28. *The Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them, so as it should not fail, that they would keep these two days according to their writing, and according to their appointed time, every year; and that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor the memorial of them perish from their seed.*

IT has been observed of the Book of Esther, that the name of God is not in it: and certainly there is not the same strain of piety pervading it as is found in the Book of Nehemiah. This perhaps may be accounted for from the circumstance of its having been written in the Court of Persia, where Jehovah, the God of Israel, was not known or acknowledged. But though in this point of view it may appear more like to a mere record of facts, it does in reality contain as striking a display of God's providence as any book in the inspired volume. In explaining the Feast of Purim, spoken of in our text, we must of necessity bring before you all the most leading facts recorded in the whole book; though we shall of course

course notice them only so far as they throw light on our main subject.

We shall consider,

I. The feast itself—

It is called the Feast of Purim, in reference to a lot which was cast (the word *Pur* signifying a lot), and which had a very principal effect in the preservation of all the Jewish people throughout the Persian dominions. But in speaking of the feast, we will distinctly state,

1. The occasion on which it was instituted—

[Haman, the Prime-minister and favourite of King Ahasuerus was offended with Mordecai a Jew, who had refused to pay him that homage which the king had enjoined to be paid him by all his courtiers. Indignant at this supposed insult, Haman sought to avenge himself, not on Mordecai alone, but on all the Jews throughout the empire. For this end, he cast a lot to determine on what day he should execute his design against them; and, having fixed the day in his own mind, obtained an order from the king that every one of them, old and young, women and children, should be put to death, and their property be delivered over as a prey to their destroyers. The Jews, informed of the edict, betook themselves to fasting and prayer: and God, in answer to their prayer, wrought a wonderful deliverance for them, and enabled them to execute upon their enemies the very evils which they themselves had been previously doomed to suffer[a]. It might have been expected indeed, when the king, at the request of Esther, had given liberty to the Jews to stand in their own defence, that their enemies would have abstained from any attempt against them, more especially when it was seen that the rulers of the different provinces favoured the Jews: but, as Haman had been hanged on the very gallows which he had erected for Mordecai, and thus had fallen the first sacrifice to his own devices, his surviving friends were determined at their own peril to carry into execution his cruel design: but God so strengthened the Jews, that they prevailed in the contest, and slew in one day no less than seventy-five thousand of their enemies, besides five hundred in the very palace of Shushan, and, on the day following, three hundred more. In commemoration of this glorious event, the Feast of Purim was instituted: and from that day to the present hour it is kept, wherever there is a body of Jews to join in the celebration of it.]

2. The manner of its observance-

[We

[a] ver. 1.

[We doubt not but that it was observed *with pious gratitude:* for though nothing is spoken of that, we may be well assured that the same piety which had enjoined a fast of three days to obtain the blessing, enjoined thanksgivings also, when the blessing was obtained.

But it was to be celebrated also *with festive mirth.* This is by no means incompatible with pious exercises, or unfit to be united with them on such an occasion as that. God himself had ordered three great feasts to be annually kept, in remembrance of his mercies; the Feast of the Passover, in remembrance of the deliverance of the Jewish first-born from the sword of the destroying Angel; the Feast of Weeks, in remembrance of the promulgation of the Law from Mount Sinai; and the Feast of Tabernacles, in remembrance of their dwelling in tents in the wilderness [b]: and these sufficiently shew that our animal nature may participate in the joys which belong more particularly to our higher and better part, provided we keep within the strict rules of temperance, and *enjoy the Donor in his gifts.*

A special direction also was given, that the feast should be kept *with active benevolence:* the richer were not only to send portions to each other, but to provide for the poor also, who could not otherwise be partakers of the general joy. This was a very essential part of the institution, and highly proper to be observed; since we ought then more particularly to shew love to our brethren, when we are commemorating God's love to us. This union of piety, festivity, and love, may be seen in the feast which Nehemiah made for the people, when Ezra expounded to them the law of God [c]: and it were to be wished that *we*, in the feasts instituted for the commemoration of still richer blessings, were careful never to separate what God in his ordinances has so plainly joined together.]

The very particular injunctions given by Esther, and Mordecai, and all the principal Jews, respecting the perpetual observance of this feast, lead us naturally to inquire into,

II. The ends and reasons for which it was appointed—

It doubtless was designed,

1. As a memorial of God's goodness to them—

[It was right to keep up, as far as possible, the remembrance of this mercy to all future generations. We are but too apt to forget the goodness of God to us: and we need occasional observances commemorative of them, in order to revive in our minds

[b] Deut. xvi. 16. [c] Neh. viii. 10, 12.

minds the impressions, which the first communication of his blessings excited in us. It was on this principle that God appointed a number of days to be kept holy under the Law; and for the same end is the ordinance of the Lord's Supper appointed under the Gospel; "Do this in remembrance of me: for as oft as ye shall eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do shew forth the Lord's death, till he come." On the same principle the Fathers of our Church have set apart certain days for the special contemplation of those mysteries, on which the salvation of the whole world depends; the incarnation, the death, the resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. In truth, the Jews in all ages are equally interested in this event; since, if the design of Haman had been carried into effect, the whole posterity of all the Jews in that immense empire would have been cut off in one day: and consequently they, as much as their remoter ancestors, are bound to "keep God's great goodness to them ever in remembrance."]

2. As an incentive to love and serve him—

[Commandments have but little effect, where love does not exist towards the authority that enjoined them. It is love alone that will constrain us to a willing and unreserved obedience even to God himself. Hence St. Paul urges us "by the mercies of God to yield ourselves as living sacrifices unto him;" for it is a sense of them only that will enable us to regard such a surrender of ourselves to him as "a reasonable service[d]." Now certainly the contemplation of this great deliverance could not but deeply affect the hearts of all, and stir them up to glorify their adorable Benefactor. And though, alas! at this time the feast is made only an occasion of intemperance amongst all who observe it, yet it ought to excite far other sentiments than those of carnal mirth, and to stimulate to far other conduct than that of riot and excess.]

3. As an encouragement to trust in God—

[In this view it may well be a feast to the whole world. For where can we find, except in the history of Joseph, so striking an exhibition of the ways of Providence, as in the history before us? Even long before the wicked thought was conceived in the heart of Haman did God in a most singular manner exalt Esther to the throne, that she might be able to counteract and defeat his purpose: and he enabled Mordecai also to detect and reveal a conspiracy against the life of the monarch, that he might afterwards have the influence that was necessary for the final preservation of the Jewish people. When Haman had conceived the purpose, he superstitiously "cast a lot from month to month, and from day to day," to determine the best time for

[d] Rom. xii. i.

for carrying it into effect: and behold God, "with whom alone the disposal of the lot rests," so ordered it, that the lot should fall on the very last month, and on the thirteenth day of that month; so that there was abundant time for making the people sensible of their danger, and for accomplishing their deliverance. That the king should have a sleepless night might appear a very trivial accident; yet in the Divine counsels it was an important link in the chain of his purposes, since it led to the exaltation of Mordecai at the very moment when Haman was prepared to put him to death. In a word, the courage with which Esther was inspired to go in, uncalled for, to the king, the readiness of the king to hear and answer her requests, the versatility of the courtiers, the jealousy of the king, together with many other circumstances, all led to the immediate overthrow of Haman, and the consequent deliverance of the Jewish people. How remarkable was it, that Haman himself, and afterwards his ten sons also, should be hanged on that very gallows which had been prepared by Haman for Mordecai; and that, instead of the Jews being put to death, they by the king's own authority should destroy seventy-five thousand of their enemies, besides eight hundred in the very palace of the king! All this shews, how impossible it is to fight successfully against God, and how safe they are who put their trust under the shadow of his wings. Truly, if God be for us, we need not be concerned how many there may be against us; for "mightier is He that is in us, than he that is in the world." Only let us trust in him, and not a hair of our head shall perish.]

ADDRESS—

1. To those who make a profession of religion—

[You must expect, as in the days of old, that the "enmity which exists between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman" will yet shew itself, and that "they who are born after the flesh will persecute those who are born after the Spirit." As you differ from the world in the laws which you obey, and in the habits you maintain, you must expect to be represented by them as enemies both to the Church and State[e]. But commit your cause to God, and he will preserve you. Your enemies may rage; but "no weapon that is formed against you shall prosper." There is an efficacy in fervent prayer, that shall bring Omnipotence to your aid: and though your trials may be great and of long continuance, yet shall they issue in more abundant joy to you, and honour to your God.]

2. To those who shew hostility to the people of God—

[You little think whom it is that you revile and persecute:

[e] Ch. iii. 8.

cute: "He that hateth you hateth ME," says our Lord; and again, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" The people of God are regarded by him as "his first-fruits," which, being the Lord's property, no man was at liberty to consume: be assured therefore, that "all who shall devour them will offend; (i. e. will stumble;) and evil will come upon them[f]." It were "better for you to have a millstone put about your neck, and to be cast into the sea, than that you should offend one of his little ones." Let the history before us suffice to shew you, that "whoso toucheth them, toucheth the apple of Jehovah's eye."]

3. To those who in the midst of a persecuting world have been preserved—

[Know to whom you owe it, that you have not been given up as a prey into the hands of your enemies. The agency of God's providence is secret, so that you behold it not: but you reap the benefit of it, and will at a future day see as striking interpositions in your favour as those which are recorded in the history before us. Go on then, serving the Lord without fear, and multiply your services for him as he multiplies his mercies unto you.]

[f] Jer. ii. 3.

CCCII.

JOB'S ANXIETY FOR HIS CHILDREN.

Job i. 5. *And it was so, when the days of their feasting were gone about, that Job sent and sanctified them, and rose up early in the morning, and offered burnt-offerings according to the number of them all: for Job said, It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts. Thus did Job continually.*

WHO Job was, or at what precise period he lived, or who wrote the book that is called by his name, is not certainly known. It is probable that he was a descendant of Nahor, Abraham's brother[a], and that he lived previous to the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, because there does not appear to be any direct reference to that event, which there would in all probability have been, if it had taken place, and Job or his friends had been acquainted with it. The book of Job, with the exception of the two first chapters, and part of the last, is written in verse;

[a] Gen. xxii 20, 21.

verse; and this has given occasion to some to imagine, that the whole book is a kind of poetic fiction: but there undoubtedly was such a man as Job[b]; and the events referred to in the book of Job did actually occur[c]; and the record of them was most assuredly inspired[d]. Though therefore we admit that the conversation which passed between him and his friends is not recorded in the precise words used by the different speakers, yet it is certain that the *substance* of their respective speeches is correctly given, and that the record of them was written under the direction of God himself; so that it is, as much as any other part of the inspired volume, the word of God. The *scope* of the book must be clearly understood, and be borne in mind throughout; for, if we lose sight of that, the whole will be a mass of confusion. The friends of Job conceived, that his extraordinary calamities proved that his former professions of piety had been hypocritical: and Job maintained, that the trials which a man might be called to endure were no just criterion whereby to judge of his state; since the most upright of men might be deeply afflicted, and the most ungodly of men might enjoy uninterrupted ease and prosperity. And it will be found in the sequel, that, though Job in some instances was unguarded in his expressions, his views on the whole were right, and those of his friends erroneous. But we must not therefore conclude, that his friends uttered nothing that was good: their general sentiments were just; but their application of them to Job's particular case was incorrect: their premises were often right; but their conclusions wrong. Their great error was, that they thought such extraordinary dispensations of God's providence towards a man must be sent on account of some extraordinary wickedness committed by him. Conceiving themselves to be correct in this, they concluded Job to have been a hypocrite, and

[b] Ezek. xiv. 14. [c] Jam. v. 11.

[d] It is referred to by St. Paul in this view. Compare Job v. 13. with 1 Cor. iii. 19.

and that God had now exposed his hypocrisy to the view of all: and Job, on the contrary, maintained that he had been upright in all his conduct, and that the judgment of his friends was uncharitable, erroneous, and wicked.

But it is not our intention to enter any farther into the general question between Job and his friends at present: we have now only to consider the private character of Job, and *that* more particularly in reference to his family. He is represented as a man of most eminent piety, as being "perfect and upright, and one that feared God and eschewed evil[e]:" and, from what is said of him in our text, he evidently deserved that high character. Let us consider then,

I. His conduct in relation to his family—

God had blessed him with a numerous family, whom he had reared to manhood, and placed around him with separate establishments. But, notwithstanding he had thus liberally provided for them, and was evidently most indulgent towards them, (promoting to the uttermost a brotherly union among them, and permitting his daughters to enliven the innocent conviviality of their domestic circles,) he was exceeding watchful and jealous over their eternal interests. His seven sons had been entertaining each other in succession: and, though Job knew not that any thing contrary to God's will had passed amongst them, yet, conceiving it possible that they might in their mirth have been transported too far, he called them to prepare themselves for a solemn attendance upon God, whilst he should offer for every one of them a burnt-offering unto the Lord.

Now consider this as an act,

1. Of Magisterial authority—

[It is manifest that he was, if not a King, yet a Magistrate, possessing very high authority, and occupied to a great extent in judicial proceedings[f]: yet he did not therefore think himself at liberty to neglect religion, or to confine his attention to

[e] ver. 1. [f] Ch. xxix. 5—10.

to private duties: he felt that the more exalted his station was, the greater was his responsibility, and the more urgent his duty to honour God before men. What a blessing would it be, if all people of wealth and dignity would use their influence in this way! But the generality of great men think there is no need for *them* to stand forth as patrons and patterns of religion: they suppose they have a dispensation from such open acts of piety as would attract observation, and make them appear particular; and that, if they countenance by their presence the public institutions of religion, it is quite as much as can be required at their hands. But we must declare to all, that, if Job, with the small measure of light which he enjoyed, accounted it his duty to exert all his influence for the honour of his God, much more should we, who profess to have received the full light of the Gospel, feel it our duty to devote all our faculties and all our talents to the honour of Christ, and the extension of his kingdom upon earth.]

2. Of parental love—

[Many who have been careful of their children in their earlier days, cast off all concern about them, or at least decline all interference with them as to religious matters, when they have arrived at years of discretion. But so did not Job: though he was an indulgent parent, he did not give up all parental authority, but sought to use it for the eternal welfare of his children. He called them all to self-examination and prayer, previous to his offering for them the sacrifices in which he commanded them to join[g]. Yea, we are told, "Thus he did continually;" continually watching over their eternal interests, and using all his influence, both with them and with God, to bring them to the enjoyment of the Divine favour. In this he is a pattern for parents in every age, and in every place. As long as God shall continue to them the possession of their intellects, so long should they improve their authority for the enforcing of an attention to religious duties, and for the cultivating of a spirit of piety in the hearts of their children.]

The peculiarity of his conduct naturally leads us to inquire into,

II. The grounds and reasons of it—

Had any great evil been committed by his sons, to call forth that particular exercise of parental authority, we should have ascribed to that the conduct of this holy man: but, as no evil existed but in his apprehensions, we must look for the grounds of his conduct

[g] This is the meaning of the word "sanctified." See Exod. xix. 10, 14.

conduct in some general views and principles to which it is to be traced. It was founded in Job's views of,

1. The extreme depravity of our nature—

[Though he had trained up his children in pious principles, he knew that they were by nature prone to evil, and that there was not any sin which, if left to themselves, they might not commit. He knew that they might even go so far as to speak lightly of God and his dispensations, whether of providence or grace; yea, through an evil heart of unbelief they might depart from God altogether, and actually renounce their allegiance to him. Hence he was desirous to obtain mercy for them, that, if they should have committed so great a sin, they might be brought back again to repentance, and not be left to perish for ever in their iniquity.

Now in this respect the views of Job were just: for the heart of man by nature is "deceitful above all things and desperately wicked;" and, whatever education he may have received, and whatever eminence in piety he may have attained, he has reason to pray, "Hold up my goings in thy paths, that my footsteps slip not!" yea, he has reason to fear, "lest, having preached to others, he himself should become a cast-away." And every person in the universe should bear this in mind, in reference both to himself and others: for it is "God alone that is able to keep us from falling," and it is only whilst "he holds us up that we can be safe."]

2. The corrupt tendency of carnal mirth—

[Mirth may be very innocently enjoyed: but there is great danger, especially when indulged to any extent, that it may become an occasion of evil. It certainly tends to stupify the conscience, and to deaden our affections towards God. When we are rejoicing much in earthly things, we are apt to languish in our desire of heavenly things; and to feel less ardent longings for the glory that shall be revealed. Moreover, when "we are full, there is danger lest we deny God, and say, "Who is the Lord[g]?" It was against this that God cautioned his people of old[h], and this effect Job saw as likely to be produced in his own children. Hence he called them to a particular recollection of their spirit and conduct during their days of feasting: he urged them to examine well their own hearts, and to implore help from God, that they might be enabled to discover any secret evil which might have lurked in their bosoms. Now in this he set an admirable example unto us. The world is apt to fascinate our carnal hearts; and it is extremely difficult to "use the world without abusing it." Whenever therefore we have been mixing in

[g] Prov. xxx 8, 9. [h] Deut. viii. 10, 11.

in its company and participating of its pleasures, it becomes us carefully to examine our own hearts, lest we should have offended God by our forgetfulness of him, or contracted any stain that may render us odious in his sight.]

3. The universal need of an atonement—

[Had Job offered one burnt-offering for them all, it would have sufficed to shew them what judgments they merited at the hands of God, and that nothing but the Great Sacrifice could ever avert his wrath from them; but when he offered a separate burnt-offering for each of them, these lessons were inculcated with double force. In truth, whether the young men had transgressed, or not, to the extent that their father feared, it was still necessary that they should apply to the blood of atonement to cleanse them from their sins. We need one to "bear the iniquity of our holiest actions," and much more to expiate the guilt which we contract in an hour of conviviality and mirth: "Without shedding of blood there can be no remission" of any sin whatever: and a most important lesson we shall learn from this history, if we take occasion from it to get this truth deeply impressed upon our hearts.]

Let us LEARN from hence,

1. To exercise a jealousy over ourselves—

[If it was right in Job to be jealous over his sons, it must surely be right for all to maintain a similar disposition in reference to themselves: nor is it only after a season of conviviality that we should exercise it, but at all times. Not a day should pass without diligent self-examination how we have passed our time, and how we have performed our several duties in the world, the family, and the closet; what tempers we have manifested towards man, and what affections we have exercised towards God. Have we received every thing, whether good or evil, as from him, and endeavoured to enjoy him in our comforts and to bless him for all our trials? In a word, let us especially inquire from time to time whether we have under all circumstances walked as in his immediate presence, and laboured to glorify his great and glorious name? "This, like Job, we should do continually: and, like him also, we should occasionally set apart a day for more than ordinary self-examination, for deep humiliation on account of our innumerable short-comings and defects, and for a more earnest application to the blood of our Great Sacrifice to expiate the guilt of all sins, whether deliberate or unintentional, whether known or unknown.]

2. To seek above all things the eternal welfare of our children—

[It is undoubtedly a parent's duty to seek the comfortable settlement

settlement of his children in some good and useful occupation: but it is his duty also to seek above all things the salvation of their souls. Consider, ye who have families, that from you has been transmitted to your children a corrupt nature, which, if not changed by Divine grace, will hurry them on to everlasting perdition. Surely then ye are bound to seek this grace for them: ye are bound to pray for them night and day: ye are bound to restrain them also, and to "bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord[i]." Nor is it only in their earlier years that you are thus to watch over them, but in after life: and if you neglect to do so, you will involve *yourselves* in the deepest guilt, and be justly answerable for *them* in the day of judgment: "their blood will be justly required at your hands." In particular, be careful to instil into their minds high and reverential thoughts of God, and adoring gratitude to Christ for the atonement which he has made for sin and sinners. Teach them to go to that Saviour continually, and to wash in the fountain of his blood, which alone can cleanse them from their sins. Thus, whatever may be the issue of your labours with respect to them, you will stand acquitted in your own concience, and have a testimony from God in the last day that you have done the things which were pleasing in his sight; "Well done, good and faithful servant; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."]

[i] 1 Sam. iii. 13.

CCCIII.

TRIALS AND RESIGNATION OF JOB.

Job i. 20, 21. *Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground and worshipped, and said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.*

BEHOLD, the invisible world is here opened to our view. We here see an assembly of the sons of God, (whether of angels, or of glorified saints, is not certain,) and Satan himself intruding in among them, in the very presence of their God. We are informed also of a conversation passing between Jehovah and Satan in reference to Job; God commending him as the most eminent of the saints on earth; and Satan traducing his character, as *a mercenary hypocrite*, who would even curse his Maker to his face, if only he should

should be tempted to do so by a withdrawment of his temporal prosperity. We are told also that God permitted Satan to put the piety of Job to the test which he had proposed.

There would be no inconsistency in this, if we were to interpret it *literally*: but we apprehend that it is a kind of parabolic representation, like that of Micaiah, who saw in a vision a Spirit coming into the presence of Jehovah, and proposing to go forth as a lying spirit in the mouth of Ahab's prophets, in order to persuade Ahab to go up to Ramoth-Gilead[a]. In this view it is intended to shew us the malignity of Satan, and of the restraints imposed upon him by Almighty God, who will suffer him to proceed no further than shall ultimately lead to his own confusion.

In whichever way we take this account, whether literally or mystically, it appears that Satan was permitted to assault Job with the most grievous temptations, and that the piety of Job was victorious in the conflict. In considering this account of Job, we shall notice,

I. His trials—

These were beyond measure great—

[Their *number and variety*; their *rapid succession*, without one moment allowed him for reflection and prayer; the *extent* of them, comprehending the loss not only of all his worldly property, but of all his children, and that too in a *season* of mirth, when he was peculiarly apprehensive that they might be least fit to die; and particularly the *certainty* of all these calamities, every one of them being reported by an eye-witness; all of these coming so *suddenly*, were sufficient to overwhelm any one, more especially when *the hand of God himself* appeared, not in *the language of the reporters* only, but in the events themselves, to have been thus awfully directed against him.]

In them we see,

1. How great the power of Satan is—

[How speedily he found instruments to execute his will! The minds of Sabæans and Chaldeans received in a moment the impulse which he chose to give them; and they performed exactly the service to which he destined them: the time, the manner, the measure

[a] 1 Kin. xxii. 19—22.

measure of their actions were perfectly subject to his controul. The elements also were alike obedient to his command, and performed precisely what he directed them to effect: the lightnings flashed, the winds blew, and, by their ready compliance with his will, proclaimed him to be indeed "the god of this world," "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that worketh in all the children of disobedience." True it is, he could not have done these things if God had not permitted him: but from what he did we may easily see what he both could and would do, if all restraint were withdrawn from him; and what he will do in the eternal world to those who shall be delivered into his hands.]

2. How uncertain is all worldly good—

[When Job arose in the morning, he was "the richest man in all the east;" and before night he was bereft of all that he possessed. And such changes are by no means unfrequent in the world. Not to mention the restless desires of a gamester, the unfortunate speculations of a merchant, or the mis-placed confidence of a surety, (all of which are fruitful sources of misery and ruin,) let us contemplate those other sources of calamity which are more out of the reach of human prudence, such as earthquakes, inundations, shipwrecks, invasions, conflagrations; alas! alas! how many thousands are from time to time reduced by these from a state of ease and opulence to the most abject and destitute condition! Verily there can be no one so ignorant as not to know, as well from observation as report, that "riches make themselves wings, and fly away."]

3. That the most eminent saints are not exempt from even the heaviest calamities—

[If ever any man could venture to say, "I shall die in my nest[b]," it was Job; because, whilst he possessed more wealth than others, he had a mind more under the influence of piety, and consequently more free from those snares and temptations to which others are exposed. Yet, though there was no one like him upon earth in respect of piety, there never was a man so oppressed as he by overwhelming calamities. Let no man then ever venture to say, "My mountain standeth fast; I shall not be moved:" for "all things come alike to all." "Of the righteous in particular the afflictions are many:" as in the case of Job, God often sends troubles to try and prove the sincerity of their faith, to strengthen their graces, to purify their hearts, to display before the world the efficacy of his grace, and to fit his people for a better world. If God have given faith to any, they may expect that it shall "be tried, in order that it may be to the praise and honour and glory of their God at the appearing of Jesus Christ[c]."]

But

[b] Job xxix. 18. [c] 1 Pet. i. 7.

But in the midst of all his trials we behold, and admire,

II. His resignation—

He felt, and deeply too, the heavy load of his afflictions; and hence he rent his mantle, and shaved his head, as customary expressions of deep anguish of mind[d]. But still he was composed and tranquil, "not charging God foolishly," or uttering any thing hasty or unadvised. Let us notice;

1. The considerations with which he quieted his mind—

[These were two; namely, That what he had lost, was not properly his own; and, That HE had taken it, whose property it was. He felt himself now only reduced to the state in which he was when he came into the world, and in which he must at all events soon be, when he should be called to go out of the world again. Why then should he repine and murmur at being stripped of all, when he was so lately, and must so soon again be, altogether naked, without any thing that he could properly call his own? So just and important is this idea, that St. Paul has actually quoted the very words of Job, to shew that "godliness with contentment is the only desirable gain[dd]."

Moreover, the use and enjoyment of those things had been given him by God alone: whether they came by inheritance, or had been the fruits of his own industry, God was equally the giver of them[e]: and, whether men or devils or elements had deprived him of them, they were no other than as instruments in the hand of God, who had accomplished by them his own sovereign will[f]. How then could he presume to reply against God? No: "he would be dumb, and not open his mouth, because the Lord had done it."

What astonishing grace was here, that could suggest at a moment such thoughts as these, and give them such an efficacy to compose and tranquillize his soul!

But let us notice more particularly,]

2. The manner in which he expressed his resignation—

[He "fell on the ground and worshipped" his God with the profoundest humility. O what submission of heart was here! How meekly did he receive at the Lord's hands the strokes of his chastening rod! But he went further still, and "blessed

[d] Gen. xxxvii. 29, 34. with Job ii. 12. & Isai. xxii. 12. with Mic. i. 16. [dd] 1 Tim. vi. 7—9. [e] Jam. i. 17.
[f] Isai. xlv. 7. Am. iii. 6.

"blessed the name of the Lord," yea, *blessed* him for that very dispensation which Satan expected to have called forth only the language of *cursing* and blasphemy. Job was convinced in his judgment that "the Judge of all the earth could not but do right;" and that however clouds and darkness might be round about him, yet judgment and justice were the basis of his throne." He knew that whether he could see the reason of God's dealings now, or not, he should see reason to adore him for them in the eternal world; and therefore he would bless and adore him for them here. Thus did he adopt exactly the line of conduct which God approves; "neither despising the chastening of the Lord, on the one hand, nor fainting under his rebukes," on the other hand[g]. He "walked by faith, and not by sight," and excelled all the saints, whether of that or any other age. David was not the least eminent of men; yet when the Amalekites had invaded Ziklag, and taken away his wives and property, "he wept till he had no more power to weep[h]:" and when he lost his rebellious son Absalom, he so fainted under the loss as to be altogether forgetful of all his mercies, and of all his duties[i]. But Job lost not for a moment his self-possession: his principles operated instantly to the full extent that the occasion required: "Shall we receive good at the hands of God," says he, "and shall we not receive evil[j]?" Any other conduct appeared to him to be highly unreasonable: and hence he is proposed by God himself as a pattern for our imitation to the end of time[k].]

From contemplating this exalted character, let us LEARN,

1. To sit loose to earthly things—

[We deny not but that a competency in earthly things is a blessing for which we have great reason to be thankful: but when we see how uncertain the possession of them is, and, above all, how happy we may be in God without them, we have no occasion to covet them, or to set our hearts upon them. St. Paul, when "he had nothing, yet possessed all things[l]," because he had God for his God and portion. Let us in like manner "learn in every state to be content, whether we be full or hungry, whether we abound or suffer need[m]." Let us, "if we have a wife, be as though we had none; if we weep, be as if we wept not; if we rejoice, be as if we rejoiced not; if we buy, be as though we possessed not; and altogether use this world as not abusing it, because the fashion of it so quickly passes away[n]."]

2. To stand prepared for trials—

[Truly we know not what a day or an hour may bring forth;

[g] Heb. xii. 5. [h] 1 Sam. xxx. 3, 4. [i] 2 Sam. xix. 4—6.
[j] Job ii. 10. [k] Jam. v. 11. [l] 2 Cor. vi. 10.
[m] Phil. iv. 11, 12. [n] 1 Cor. vii. 29—31.

forth; what losses we may have in our property, or in our dearest friends and relatives; or what calamities may come upon us. We are sure that "Satan, that roaring lion," is "going to and fro throughout the earth," "seeking whom he may devour:" and, if he have obtained permission to exercise his power against us, how soon may he bring us down to the ground, and even "sift us as wheat!" Who amongst us can have any idea what storms he may be preparing for us, or what instruments he may be stirring up against us? Knowing then his malignity and his power, let us stand upon our guard against him; let us "arm ourselves with the mind that was in Christ Jesus[o];" and let us so endeavour to realize our principles, that we never give way to discontent or impatience, but bless in every thing the name of our God.]

3. To seek the things which neither men nor devils can take away from us—

[Spiritual blessings are out of the reach of all our enemies: "Our life is hid with Christ in God;" and not all the powers of darkness combined can destroy it. Moth and rust may corrupt our earthly treasures, or thieves may break through and steal them: but if we lay up treasure in heaven, it will be inaccessible to them all. *That* is "*substance*[p]," whilst all else is vanity and vexation of spirit. Let us then "labour for the meat that endureth to everlasting life;" and "choose the good part, that never can be taken away from us."]

[o] 1 Pet. iv. 1. [p] Prov. viii. 21.

CCCIV.

FRIENDLY SYMPATHY ILLUSTRATED.

Job ii. 11—13. *Now, when Job's three friends heard of all this evil that was come upon him, they came every one from his own place; Eliphaz the Temanite, and Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite: for they had made an appointment together to come to mourn with him, and to comfort him. And when they lifted up their eyes afar off, and knew him not, they lifted up their voice and wept; and they rent every one his mantle, and sprinkled dust upon their heads toward heaven. So they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him: for they saw that his grief was very great.*

JOB in a second conflict had gained the victory: yea, though his wife acted as a confederate with Satan,

Satan, and urged him to "curse God and die," yet did he retain his integrity, and prove himself worthy of the character which God had given him. But the rumour of his unprecedented calamities had spread far and wide, and had caused all those who should have been a comfort to him to depart from him; insomuch that, having none to administer to his relief, he had "taken a potsherd to scrape himself withal." But three of his aged friends, descendants of Abraham, though not of the chosen seed, still loved and honoured him; and feeling their incompetency, as individuals, to afford him all the instruction and consolation that the occasion called for, concerted a plan to visit him together, and to unite their efforts for his welfare. An account of their first interview is here set before us; and a most interesting account it is. In discoursing upon it, we shall be led to contemplate,

I. The nature of love—

[Love, as described by St. Paul[a], and as summarily expressed by our blessed Lord[b], is the acting in all things towards our neighbour as we would think it right that he, in a change of circumstances, should act towards us. It makes us to consider all men as members of one great body, and to participate with them in their feelings, as the different members of our own body would with each other[c]. If any be afflicted, it prompts us to fly to their relief, and to concert the best measures in our power for their restoration to happiness. In the friends of Job we see the nature of love well exemplified: they did not feel indifferent about him, or run from him, as they did whose hearts were destitute of love; but they met together for the express purpose of participating and alleviating his sorrows. They did this, too, unsolicited, and unsought: it was the fruit of a Divine principle within them, the voluntary expression of their own affectionate regards. This was a "love, not in word and in tongue, but in deed and in truth:" it was "a love without dissimulation:" and wherever true love exists, it will produce exactly the same dispositions, and stimulate, according to its measure, to the same exertions.]

In executing their benevolent plan, Job's friends have shewn us,

II. The

[a] 1 Cor. xiii. 4—7. [b] Mark xii. 31. Matt. vii. 12.
[c] 1 Cor. xii. 25, 26.

II. The effects of sympathy—

[When they were yet at some distance from him, they saw him; but would not have recognized him at all, (so altered was he in his whole appearance,) if they had not been prepared for the change by the reports which they had heard concerning him. But the sight deeply affected them all; so that they burst forth into floods of tears, and rent their mantles, as expressive of their anguish, and sprinkled dust upon their heads towards heaven, as mourners were wont to do[d]. On coming into his immediate presence, "they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, that is, a considerable part of each successive day[e]; and so overwhelmed were they with the sight of his melancholy condition, that none of them could give utterance to their feelings, or attempt to suggest any thing for his relief.

Those who have never known from their own experience how entirely the soul may be overwhelmed with sympathy, conjecture, that during all this time the friends of Job were harbouring suspicions which they did not dare to express. But this idea is very injurious to the character of those holy men, and directly contrary to the account given in our text: for their silence is expressly ascribed to the overpowering effect of their own sympathy at the sight of his unparalleled afflictions; "They spake not, *for* they saw that his grief was very great:" and to this cause it must be ascribed. We know, that as silence is the proper effect of great sorrow[f], (David says, "I am so troubled that I cannot speak[g],") so is it also of deep sympathy; such as the elders of the daughters of Zion experienced, when they saw their city and Temple destroyed, their princes and people carried into captivity, the law of their God forgotten, and their prophets no longer favoured with visions from the Lord[h]. In a word, the effect of sympathy is, to make the sorrows of another our own; and to produce in our hearts those very feelings of grief and anguish, which the afflicted individual himself is called to sustain.]

The interview, thus illustrated, displays,

III. The excellence of true religion—

[The whole of true religion is comprehended under the term *love:* "Love is the fulfilling of the law[i]." Moreover, the sympathy before delineated, is the most unequivocal expression of love: "Pure religion, and undefiled before God and the Father, is this; To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction[k]." See then religion as exemplified in our text, how beautiful

[d] See this whole expression of sorrow exemplified in those who mourned over the destruction of Tyre; Ezek. xxvii. 30, 31.

[e] See Luke ii. 37. & Acts xx. 31.

[f] "Curæ leves loquuntur; ingentes stupent."

[g] Ps. lxxvii. 4.

[h] Lam. ii. 9—11.

[i] Rom. xii. 8—10.

[k] Jam. i. 27.

beautiful does it appear! A carnal mind would admire rather a sight of kings surrounded by their nobles: but God and his holy angels, I have no doubt, esteem such a sight as was exhibited on that occasion, as infinitely grander than all the pomp of courts, yea than of "Solomon in all his glory." Never did our Lord himself appear more glorious, no not even on the mount of transfiguration, than when he was weeping with sympathy at the tomb of Lazarus, or with compassion over the devoted city of Jerusalem. So the sight of these aged men, assembled to mourn with, and to comfort, their afflicted Brother, and expressing in such significant ways their overwhelming sorrow, was as noble and as interesting as can be seen on earth. And oh, what would this world be, if every one possessed such a spirit as they evinced! Yet such is the tendency of true religion, which transforms us into the image of that God, whose name and nature is LOVE.]

By way of IMPROVEMENT, we will,

1. Recommend to you the exercise of these dispositions—

[Behold these men, how amiable they appear in all the posture and habiliments of woe! And are they not a fit pattern for you to imitate? But you have a brighter pattern than they, even our Lord Jesus Christ himself; who, when he saw our fallen state, came down from heaven to seek and save us, yea, "though rich, for our sakes he became poor, that we through his poverty might be rich." Oh, what marvellous grace was here! and still, "as our Great High Priest, he is touched with the feeling of our infirmities, having been himself in all things tempted like as we are, on purpose that he might succour them that are tempted." If then the example of Job's friends be not sufficient to commend to you these lovely dispositions, let me intreat you to seek "the mind that was in Christ." As a further inducement to this, consider how soon you yourselves may need the compassion and the sympathy of others. There is no man so secure, but he is open to the assaults of trouble on every side. Would you then in trouble have any to sympathize with you? Know, that "he who would have friends must shew himself friendly[l];" and that you must sow the grain which you desire to reap. This is an argument used by God himself, who bids us to "remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them that suffer adversity, as being ourselves also in the body[m]." If any further motive be wanted, consider, that in the day of judgment the exercise of this disposition will be a very principal subject of inquiry, as evincing the sincerity of our love to Christ: and every act of love towards the poorest of his people will be acknowledged by HIM as a favour conferred upon himself.

[l] Prov. xviii. 24. [m] Heb. xiii. 3.

himself[n]. Let me then recommend the exercise of love and sympathy to all who would adorn their holy profession now, or be approved of their God in that great and awful day.]

2. Suggest some cautions in relation to it—

[Let not sympathy be shewn with the rich only, or with our own particular friends; but let it be extended to all who are in trouble, whether rich or poor, whether known or unknown[nn]. We deny not but that those who are nearly related to us have a superior claim; as they have also who are of the household of faith[o]: but still we must, like the good Samaritan, account every man our neighbour, and gladly avail ourselves of every opportunity of pouring balm into his wounded spirit.

Again, Wait not till you are called and summoned to the house of mourning; but go thither of your own accord, esteeming it "far better to go there, than to the house of feasting[p]." Let the principle of love in you be like a spring, ever ready to act, the moment that a scope for action is afforded it. Look not every man on his own things only, but every man also on the things of others[q];" and be ready on all occasions to "rejoice with them that rejoice, and to weep with them that weep[r]." This readiness to bear one another's burthens is a fulfilling of the law of Christ[s]."

But lastly, Be not hasty to offer advice to those who are bowed down with a weight of trouble. There is a sacredness in grief which demands our reverence; and the very habitation of a mourner must be approached with awe. A hasty effusion even of consolatory truths is offensive to one who is not prepared in a measure for the reception of them. The language of many is, "Look away from me; I will weep bitterly; labour not to comfort me[t]:" and to such, an obtrusive officiousness is disgusting. To such, the silent eloquence of sighs and tears is more consolatory than the most copious harangue. See that you yourselves feel deeply; and then you will neither fall into an officious impertinence, on the one hand, nor deem even a silent visit unserviceable, on the other: you will patiently wait for the most favourable season, and administer your instructions as the mourner is able to receive them.]

[n] Matt. xxv. 40. [nn] Job xxx. 25. [o] Gal. vi. 10.
[p] Eccl. vii. 2, 4. [q] Phil. ii. 4. with 2 Cor. xi. 29.
[r] Rom. xii. 15. [s] Gal. vi. 2. [t] Isai. xxii. 4.

CCCV.

JOB CURSES THE DAY OF HIS BIRTH.

Job iii. 1. *After this, opened Job his mouth, and cursed his day.*

IT is worthy of observation, that the most eminent saints mentioned in the Sacred Records are reported, not only to have sinned, but to have failed in those very graces for which they were most distinguished. Abraham, the father of the faithful, who is set forth as the great pattern for all future believers, repeatedly denied his wife through the influence of unbelief: and Moses, the meekest of all men upon the face of the earth, spake unadvisedly with his lips, and thereby provoked God to exclude him from the earthly Canaan. Of the patience of Job the Scripture speaks in the highest terms: but, behold, he is here set forth to our view in a state of grievous impatience. Let us consider,

I. The manner in which he expressed his impatience—

It should seem as if Satan had now assaulted, not his body only, but his soul also, and had succeeded in wounding him with his fiery darts. It is probable too, that the continued silence of his friends had produced an unfavourable impression on his mind. But however these things might be,

He vented his complaints in very unbecoming terms—

[*He first cursed the day of his birth*, wishing it to be marked, both by God in his providence, and by men in their feelings, as a day of darkness and gloominess, even to the latest generations[a]. *He next expressed his regret, that he had not been left to perish as soon as he came out of the womb;* seeing that he should then have escaped all his calamities, and been quiet in the tomb, where all of every class, whatever their situations and circumstances were whilst they were living upon earth, are enjoying equal repose[b]. *And, lastly, he complained that whilst his grievous sufferings tormented him beyond measure, they did not prevail to take away his life*[c].

We have a similar instance of impatience in another eminent saint, the prophet Jeremiah, who seems almost to have adopted the very expressions in the chapter before us[d].

Alas!

[a] ver. 3—10.
[b] ver. 11—19.
[c] ver. 20—26.
[d] Jer. xx. 14—18.

Alas! how weak a creature is man when left in any measure to himself!]

But is this an uncommon line of conduct?

[No, truly: there is the same spirit in every man, ready to break forth whenever occasion offers: and in too many of us it breaks forth almost without any occasion at all. How little a thing will discompose the minds of the generality!——How small a provocation will cause them to vent their displeasure in angry and opprobrious language!——If trials be at all heavy and of long continuance, how will they disquiet our minds, and destroy all the comfort of our lives! Is it an uncommon thing for men under some calamity to feel weary of their existence, and even to entertain thoughts of terminating their sorrows by suicide! Yea, do not multitudes, who have not one half of Job's trials, actually destroy their own lives, and rush headlong into hell itself, in order to get rid of their present troubles?

Whilst then we lament the imperfections of this holy man, let us turn our eyes inwards, and contemplate the prevalence of our own corruptions, which a single loss, or disappointment, or injury is sufficient to call forth in their utmost extent.]

Having viewed the impatience of Job, let us notice,

II. Some observations arising from it:

We may justly notice,

1. The folly of arraigning the providence of God—

[Had Job been able to see the design of God in that dispensation towards him, (as sent in the purest love;) and the end in which it was soon to issue, (his greatly augmented happiness and prosperity;) had he contemplated the benefit that was to arise from it to his own soul (both in present sanctification and in eternal glory,) and to the Church of God in all ages, (in having such an example of sufferings and patience set before them,) he would never have uttered such complaints as these: he would have acknowledged then, what he afterwards so clearly saw, that "the Judge of all the earth did right." Thus if we also in our trials would look to the final issue of them, we should bear them all, whether little or great, with resignation and composure. We see Jacob complaining, "All these things are against me," and yet at last find, that the loss he so deplored was the salvation of him and all his family: it was a link in the chain of Providence to accomplish God's gracious purposes in the preservation of the chosen seed, and ultimately in the redemption of the world, by Him who was to spring from the loins of Judah. And if we saw every thing as God does, we should see that the very

very trials of which we complain are sent by God as the best means of effecting the everlasting salvation of our souls; and we should unite in the testimony of David, that "God in very faithfulness has caused us to be afflicted." Let us be contented then to leave every thing to the disposal of an all-wise God: let us in the darkest seasons "possess our souls in patience;" assured, that he doeth all things well;" and let us say with Job when in his better mind, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him."]

2. The inability of Satan to prevail against the Lord's people—

[Satan had hoped that he should instigate Job to "curse God to his face:" but in this he was disappointed. Job did indeed "curse his *day*;" but never for a moment thought of cursing his *God*. On the contrary, he often spake of God in the most honourable and reverential terms. But Satan is a chained adversary: he can prevail no further than God sees fit to permit him. He could not have done any thing against Job, if he had not first obtained leave of God. Neither can he do any thing against the least of God's people, any further than God is pleased to suffer him with a view to their eternal good. He "desired to sift Peter as wheat:" but the intercession of Christ preserved his servant from being finally overcome. "He is a roaring lion, going about seeking whom he may devour:" but he cannot seize on one of the lambs of Christ's flock. They are kept in safety by the good Shepherd; and "none can pluck them out of his hand." God has provided for his people, "armour, by means of which they shall be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all to stand[e]." Nor do the more *aged* and experienced alone defeat him; "the *young men* also overcome him[f], yea, all that are begotten of God are enabled so to "resist him, that he flees from them[g]," and "toucheth them not[h]." He may be permitted to tempt and try us[i]; but he is a vanquished enemy[k], and "shall be bruised under our feet shortly[l]."]

3. The necessity of fleeing from the wrath to come—

[There is a period fast approaching, when all the ungodly will be reduced to a state infinitely more calamitous than that of Job. They will indeed then, and with justice too, "curse the day of their birth;" for it would, as our Lord himself testifies, be "better for them that they had never been born." O what a day of darkness awaits them; a day wherein there will not be one ray of light to cheer their souls! Then will they curse

[e] Eph. vi. 10—18. [f] 1 John ii. 13, 14. [g] Jam. iv. 7.
[h] 1 John v. 18. [i] Rev. ii. 10. [k] John xii. 31.
[l] Rom. xvi. 20.

curse and "blaspheme their God, because of the plagues that he inflicts upon them[m]." They will wish for death also, and "call upon the rocks to fall upon them, and the hills to cover them[n];" but all in vain. Now if we were informed that only such troubles as Job's were coming upon us, what diligence should we use to avert them! how careful should we be to preserve our property, and to guard against the disorders with which we were threatened! Not a moment would be lost by us, nor should we decline the use of any means, to ward off such awful calamities. How earnest then should we be in fleeing from the wrath to come! Think, Brethren, what a fearful thing it will be to fall into the hands of the living God," and to "be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone," "where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched[o]." O delay not one moment to flee for refuge to the hope set before us in the Gospel: flee to Christ, as the city of refuge, where, notwithstanding all your past iniquities, you may find perfect rest and security. Do not put off the great work of your souls to a time of sickness and trouble: such a season is but ill calculated for so great a work. Look at Job: if he had neglected his soul hitherto, how incapable would he have then been of performing those offices of repentance and faith, which require all the energies of the mind! He could not even compose his mind to bear his affliction aright; much less could he have employed that season in calling his past ways to remembrance, and in turning unto God with all his heart. So we also shall find it quite enough to bear up under the pains or weakness of a dying hour. Let us then improve the time of health and prosperity, in preparing for a better world, where neither sin nor sorrow shall molest us more, but we shall be for ever happy in the bosom of our God.]

[m] Rev. xvi. 9, 11. [n] Rev. vi. 15—17.
[o] Mark ix. 43—48. with Rev. xiv. 10, 11.

CCCVI.

ELIPHAZ REPROVES JOB.

Job iv. 12—19. *Now a thing was secretly brought to me, and mine ear received a little thereof. In thoughts from the visions of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon men, fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones to shake. Then a spirit passed before my face; the hair of my flesh stood up: it stood still, but I could not discern the form thereof: an image was before mine eyes; there was silence, and I heard a voice, saying, Shall mortal man be more just than God? shall a man be more pure than his Maker? Behold, he*

he put no trust in his servants; and his angels he charged with folly: how much less in them that dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, which are crushed before the moth?

THE controversy on the part of Job's friends is here begun: and Eliphaz leads the way. He begins with acknowledging Job's former usefulness in alleviating the sorrows of others, but turns it into a ground of accusation against him for not bearing with more fortitude his own sorrows. The testimony however was most honourable to Job: for we can scarcely conceive a more honourable character, than that of one who, possessing all the influence of wealth, and power, and wisdom, employs it all in instructing and comforting the sons and daughters of affliction: and we cannot be surprised, that, when Eliphaz was so well acquainted with the benevolent exertions of Job, he did not in his own conduct pay greater attention to his example. It is evident, that he did not duly estimate the calamities of Job: not feeling them in his own person, he was not aware of their weight and pressure; else he never could have spoken so lightly of his affliction, as to say, "It *toucheth* thee, and thou art troubled;" and then to make his confidence a subject of derision. But let us come to the argument with which Eliphaz thought to confound Job; "Who ever perished, being innocent?" This was the ground on which all Job's friends proceeded: they maintained, that his suffering were a certain proof of his having committed some enormous wickedness, which God was now punishing. From appealing thus to observation and experience, Eliphaz proceeds to mention a revelation which he had received from heaven, and which, in his opinion, strongly confirmed the sentiments he had delivered. This revelation we shall now consider;

I. Abstractedly—

The circumstance of so remarkable a vision having been given to Eliphaz, in order to fix his attention the more

more deeply on the instruction conveyed with it, clearly shews, that the revelation delivered to him was of great importance. The very terror also which the vision inspired, led him, and should lead us also, to regard every word that was spoken with reverence and godly fear. As he trembled at the sight, so should we "tremble at the word."

But we must not so understand the word as if it imported only that man is not *more just or more pure* than God; for such a truth as that needed no revelation to make it known: it was obvious to all, and acknowledged by all, without any such confirmation as this. The truths intended to be made known, were these;

1. That no man is pure before God—

[Man is a weak and sinful creature: his very nature is corrupt: and therefore, whatever superiority to others he may possess in point of dispositions or conduct, he must shut his mouth, and acknowledge himself guilty before God[a]. Having once violated the law in any one particular, (and it is as much violated by defect, as by actual transgression,) he is condemned by it, and must to all eternity confess himself a just object of God's displeasure. Job himself, notwithstanding some apparent inconsistency in his assertions, was convinced of this, and expressed it too in very strong terms[b]; just as it is elsewhere declared in holy Scripture[c]. Even the angels themselves are not so perfect, but that they are capable of committing sin, precisely as the fallen angels did: nor are they so intelligent, but that they would be guilty of the most egregious folly, if a work like that of governing the world were entrusted to them for one single hour. God therefore "can put no trust in them:" and if "he charges even them with folly," in what light must he view the children of fallen man? Verily no descendant of Adam can have any pretensions to wisdom or to purity in his sight.]

2. That no man can claim any thing at the hands of God—

[If we had done all that is commanded us, we must acknowledge ourselves to be only "unprofitable servants:" "we have done no more than was our duty to do." The same must be said of the holy angels, no one of whom ever rendered unto God either more or better service than was his duty to perform. All idea of *merit* must be excluded as well from them as from us: and it is beyond measure surprising that any one should be found amongst

[a] Rom. iii. 19. [b] Job ix. 2, 3, 20, 21, 30, 31. [c] Ps. cxliii. 2.

amongst the children of men so ignorant, so conceited, so presumptuous, as to conceive that God can by any means be made his debtor. Instead of laying God under an obligation by any thing that we can do, we ourselves are indebted to him for that grace whereby we are enabled to do any good thing, and are more abundantly indebted to him in proportion to the good which he has enabled us to perform.]

3. That no man under any circumstances can have reason to complain of God—

[We will suppose a man to be as "perfect and upright" as Job himself: we will suppose him too to suffer as severely as ever Job suffered; and that too without any previous warning, or any assignable cause: would he have any right to complain? We answer, No: if his sufferings were a thousand times heavier, even a perfect hell itself, he would have no right to complain; because, as a sinner, he is justly obnoxious to the everlasting wrath of God. "Shall a living man complain?" says Solomon. No surely: if he were dead and in hell itself, he would have no other than his just portion; and consequently, any thing short of that is a ground rather for thankfulness than complaint.]

This we apprehend to be the import of our text, abstractedly considered: but it will be proper to notice our text,

II. As tending to decide the controversy between Job and his friends.

Eliphaz thought it admirably calculated to decide the point: and so it really was, if only it had been viewed in its proper light. Let us consider it,

1. As it was applied by Eliphaz—

[Eliphaz, as we have already observed, thought that Job was suffering on account of some great and hidden abominations: and that, if he had not committed some enormous wickedness, God was too just to punish him in so signal a way. Hence he argued thus: If a just man would not deal thus with an innocent person, how much less will God! "Shall mortal man be more just than God, and more pure than his Maker? this is impossible: and therefore Job must be a hypocrite; and God has given me this vision on purpose that I may convince him of his hypocrisy. But all this was erroneous: the principle itself was false; and the application of it altogether unwarranted. It was not true that God always punishes great wickedness in this life; for "all things come alike to all;" and the wicked are often the most prosperous: nor was it true that Job, previous to these calamities, had committed any such evils as they apprehended;

for

for God himself had testified that he was perfect. Therefore, notwithstanding all his confidence, Eliphaz erred exceedingly in his interpretation of this vision.]

2. As it ought to have been applied—

[The vision had respect to the controversy: and so far Eliphaz was right: but it had not a partial reference to Job: and there Eliphaz was mistaken. It referred to all the parties, to the friends of Job as well as to Job himself. To Job it spoke powerfully, reproving him for complaining of his sufferings; because all discontent with the dispensations of God does, in fact, impeach his wisdom, and his justice in the government of the world. But "shall man be more just than God, or wiser than he who charges even the angels with folly?" This cannot be; and therefore Job was to be blamed for murmuring against God. But to his friends it spoke also. They took for granted, that, if Job was not a hypocrite, God must have been unjust in so afflicting him. But were they able to fathom all the counsels of the Almighty, and to sit in judgment upon God? Were they wiser, and more just, than HE? or was HE bound to conform his proceedings to their opinion of what was wise and just? No: they should learn therefore not to pronounce so positively upon things which were so far beyond their comprehension: they must not presume to set up their own justice as a standard, whereby to try the justice of their God; and their own wisdom, whereby to estimate the wisdom of their God. To act as they were acting, was uncharitable to their friend, and insulting to their God: and they, no less than Job, should wait for the issue of these calamities; assured, that the wisdom, the justice, and the goodness of God would at last be fully manifested in the whole of this most mysterious dispensation.

Eliphaz was partial in his interpretation of the vision: he saw its bearing upon Job; but overlooked its application to himself. And this is indeed a too common fault in hearing the word of God. We are struck with it as applicable to our neighbour; but we do not hold it up as a glass wherein to behold ourselves: we hear for others, and not for ourselves; and thus make it an occasion rather for uncharitable censures than for personal humiliation. Let us mark this evil in Eliphaz, and watch against it in ourselves.]

IMPROVEMENT—

1. Be thankful to God for the written word—

[Formerly God made known himself to men in dreams and visions, and by voices and ministering spirits; but these communications were accompanied with terror, and, as in the instance before us, not easy to be seen in all their bearings. But in the written word we have a full revelation of God's mind and will, that

that we may consult at all times; that we may have recourse to without any fear or terror; and that we may both clearly and fully understand: because if one part be dark and intricate, we may compare it with another that is more simple; and so, by comparing spiritual things with spiritual, may learn more certainly the mind of God. Besides, in the written word there are great leading principles, which will serve to throw light upon any point that is more obscure. If any thing appear contrary to the analogy of faith, we have a standard both of faith and practice whereby to try it; and may thus, for the most part, have our doubts respecting it removed. Let us be thankful then for such an inestimable treasure; and let us study the word, not as critics merely, or as controversialists to condemn others, but as persons desirous of discovering *their own* faults, and of conforming themselves in every thing to the mind and will of God.]

2. Bear in mind the infinite distance between you and your Maker—

[He is the great, the incomprehensible God: you are poor sinful worms crushed before the moth: He is the eternal and infinitely wise God: "you are of yesterday, and know nothing." Get but a just apprehension of the infinite distance between you and him, and all will go right with you: you will take your proper place, at the footstool of your God. You will receive with humility and confidence whatsoever he shall speak in his blessed word: you will, if we may so speak, give him credit for acting with unerring wisdom and goodness, even when his dispensations are most dark and mysterious: you will be submissive to his chastisements, and obedient to his will. Your insignificance as creatures will constrain you to bow before him, and to say, "Let him do as seemeth him good:" but your vileness as sinners will make you to regard with unbounded gratitude every mercy you enjoy, and especially that greatest of all mercies, the gift of his only dear Son to die for you. With what wonder and admiration will you embrace the salvation offered you in the Gospel! With what simplicity of mind will you live by faith on the Lord Jesus Christ! and with what zeal and diligence will you devote yourselves to his service! We say again, if only God be exalted in your eyes, and you be abased in the dust, all will be well: God will be glorified, and your souls be happy, both in time and eternity.]

CCCVII.

THE SECURITY OF GOD'S PEOPLE.

Job v. 19—27. *He shall deliver thee in six troubles; yea, in seven there shall no evil touch thee. In famine he shall redeem thee from death; and in war, from the power of the sword. Thou shalt be hid from the scourge of the tongue; neither shalt thou be afraid of destruction when it cometh. At destruction and famine thou shalt laugh; neither shalt thou be afraid of the beasts of the earth. For thou shalt be in league with the stones of the field; and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee. And thou shalt know that thy tabernacle shall be in peace; and thou shalt visit thy habitation, and shalt not sin. Thou shalt know also that thy seed shall be great, and thine offspring as the grass of the earth. Thou shalt come to thy grave in a full age, like as a shock of corn cometh in his season. Lo this, we have searched it, so it is; hear it, and know thou it for thy good.*

THE friends of Job were men of undoubted piety, and of very deep and extensive knowledge in the things of God. Unhappily they had taken up an erroneous principle in relation to the dealings of God with men in this world; and from that error proceeded all their criminations of Job, together with a continual misapplication of the sublimest truths. This distinction we must ever bear in mind: their general views of Divine truth were most sublime and glorious: it was only the particular point of doctrine respecting Divine providence in which they were mistaken, and in which their sentiments are not to be depended on. This very speech of Eliphaz is repeatedly quoted in other parts of Scripture as of Divine authority. Solomon adopts one part of it[a]; St. Paul quotes different parts[b]; St. James also refers to it[c]: we may therefore safely regard the promises recorded in our text as the declarations of God himself; more especially as there is not one expression in them which is not confirmed by a variety of other passages of Holy Writ. Indeed Eliphaz himself lays singular stress upon them,

[a] Prov. iii. 11. [b] 1 Cor. iii. 19. Heb. xii. 5.
[c] Jam. i. 12. & v. 11.

them, declaring, from the deepest "*search*," his full conviction of their truth; and urging a reliance on them as a most infallible source of "*good*." Regarding them therefore in this light, we shall endeavour to *explain*, *confirm*, and *improve* them.

I. To explain them—

They are very great and comprehensive—

[They insure to every believing soul *a full deliverance from all evil*. Evils may arise in quick succession, not only "six or seven," but to an indefinite extent: the pressure of famine and the calamities of war may be felt by him as well as others; and the scourge of calumny may be directed against him in a more peculiar and exclusive manner: but he shall find such interpositions of God in his favour, either for his exemption from the trial, or for his support under it, as shall sufficiently distinguish him from all others. In the very midst of the trials he shall feel himself like a man in an impregnable fortress, that "laughs at" the efforts of his bitterest foes. So chained shall all his enemies appear, that he shall feel as if the very "stones of the field were in league with him" not to wound his foot, and "the beasts of the field" not to open their mouths against him.

The same sweet assurance also is given him as to *an enjoyment of all comfort*. Not only is his mind at peace in relation to his own *personal* concerns; he has equal composure in reference to those of a *domestic* nature. Whilst he sees his family growing up around him, he knows that they also are under the protection of an all-wise Providence; and that no evil shall befal *them*. If he "visit his habitation," he has no fear that he shall find his family overwhelmed with troubles, or that he shall be *disappointed*[d] in his hopes of seeing them in "peace" and safety. Nor is it in life only that he is thus blessed, but in death also; to which he shall be brought, when ripe for glory, as a shock of corn, fully meet for the granary of heaven.]

They must however be understood with limitations and restrictions—

[Though "godliness hath the promise of the life that now is, as well as of that which is to come[e]," we are not to imagine, that the temporal promises are on the same precise footing with those which relate to things spiritual and eternal. Grace and glory are secured to the Believer *at all events*; whilst temporal prosperity is secured only so far *as shall ultimately conduce to his eternal welfare*. To *this extent* the promises are equally sure: but

[d] The word translated "*sin*," is in the margin translated "*err*;" and the true sense of the passage is that given above.

[e] 1 Tim. iv. 8.

but where the benefit of the soul will be most promoted by circumstances that are painful to flesh and blood, the lesser good gives way to the greater; and God, as a wise Parent, sends us that which he knows to be most for our eternal good. If we do not thus restrict the promises of temporal happiness, we shall be at a loss to account for all the trials that have befallen the saints from the time of Abel until this present hour: but, with that solution, there is not, nor ever has been, the smallest difference between the promises of God's word, and the dispensations of his providence.]

The promises in our text being thus explained, we proceed,

II. To confirm them—

The whole Scripture bears testimony to the truth of them. "*Search*,"

1. The law—

[Precisely the same promises were made to the Jewish people, if only they would serve their God in sincerity and truth[f]———]

2. The Prophèts—

[Not to dwell on each individual promise, we may find the whole collected together in one psalm by the sweet Singer of Israel[g]———]

3. The New Testament—

[Not only are we told in general that "God is faithful, and will not suffer his people to be tempted above that they are able[h]," but we find the Apostle actually applying to himself the promises of God to the full extent that they are specified in the text[i], and actually glorying over all the enemies that might be supposed capable of interfering with their accomplishment[k]———

In a word, the promises which we have been considering are confirmed by the uniform tenor of the holy Scriptures; and "they are sure to all" who truly rely upon them[l].]

Convinced of the truth of these promises, we are now only concerned,

III. To improve them—

Nothing can exceed the importance of them; since they most forcibly teach us,

1. Submission in trials—

[Be it so, that our afflictions are great and manifold; can we

[f] Lev. xxvi. 3—12. [g] Ps. xci. 1—16. [h] 1 Cor. x. 13.
[i] 2 Tim. iv. 18. [k] Rom. viii. 35—39. [l] Rom. iv. 16.

we have any reason for complaint, when we know that they are all ordered in number, measure, and duration, for our best and greatest good, according to the counsels of infinite wisdom and love? Can we have reason for complaint when we are assured, that they are the very dispensations which we should choose for ourselves, if we saw the issue of them as clearly as God sees it? It is in this very view that the promises are introduced, namely, to pacify the mind of Job, and to reconcile him to the afflictions which he was called to sustain[m]: and, if once we are convinced that God is fulfilling to us the promises of his word, we shall receive even the most painful dispensations as blessings in disguise[n].]

2. Confidence in supplications—

[*What will he who unsolicited* "has given us such exceeding great and precious promises," refuse *to* our earnest petitions? The very end for which he gave them was, "that by them we might be partakers of the Divine nature[o]," and be enabled "to perfect holiness in the fear of God[p]." Can we ask for any thing more than this? If we can conceive of any thing beyond, he says, "Ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you:" yea, he teaches us to expect that he will do for us exceeding abundantly "above all that we can ask or think." Let us then "draw nigh to him in full assurance of faith:" let us "open our mouths wide, that he may fill them;" and let us say to him in the confidence of a successful issue, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me."]

3. Activity in obedience—

[Who can hear such promises as God has made to us in our text, and not say, "What shall I render unto the Lord?" Can any "commandment be grievous," that proceeds from *him?* If dissuaded from any exertion or any sufferings for his sake, should we not instantly reply, "What mean ye to weep and to break my heart?" for "I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die" the most cruel death for so unspeakably gracious and good a God[q]. My Brethren, let this unbounded "love of His constrain you to live no more unto yourselves, but wholly and unreservedly to him" — — — Then indeed will this grace of God have produced its due effect, and, as Eliphaz intimates in our text, we shall have "heard and known it for our good."]

[m] ver. 17, 18.
[n] See Rom. viii. 28. 2 Cor. iv. 17, 18. 1 Pet. i. 7.
[o] 2 Pet. i. 4. [p] 2 Cor. vii. 1. [q] Acts xxi. 13.

CCCVIII.

BILDAD WARNS JOB OF THE DANGER OF HYPOCRISY.

Job viii. 8—10. *Inquire, I pray thee, of the former age, and prepare thyself to the search of their fathers; (for we are but of yesterday, and know nothing, because our days upon earth are a shadow;) shall not they teach thee, and tell thee, and utter words out of their heart? Can the rush grow up without mire? can the flag grow without water? Whilst it is yet in his greenness, and not cut down, it withereth before any other herb. So are the paths of all that forget God; and the hypocrite's hope shall perish: whose hope shall be cut off, and whose trust shall be a spider's web.*

RELIGIOUS controversy is rarely carried on with that meekness and candour, which are necessary to render it profitable to the soul. Even in such a sacred subject as religion, the generality seek for victory rather than for truth, and put such a construction on the expressions of their adversary as to distort his sentiments and to calumniate his views. The friends of Job, though good men, were guilty of this to a very great extent. In the chapter before us, Bildad begins his reply with a most unjustifiable misconstruction of all that Job had spoken; and accuses him of having represented God as "perverting justice;" when Job certainly never intended to make so impious an assertion. But still we must remember, that the general sentiments of Bildad were just; and that, if Job had really been such a character as his friends imagined, the warnings which they suggested, and the advice which they gave him, were on the whole both salutary and good.

In order to enter fully into the meaning of the words before us, we must particularly bear in mind, that Bildad regarded the sons of Job as ungodly, and Job himself as hypocritical[a]. In this view, he designates the former as "forgetting God," and the latter as having acted "the hypocrite" before him: and

[a] Compare ch. iv. 7—11. & v. 3—5. with viii. 4, 6.

and both the one and the other he compares to "a rush," which, when deprived of water, withers in a very short space of time.

We shall consider this comparison,

I. In reference to those who manifestly "forget God"—

Here, as we have observed, we must keep in view the precise *character* which Bildad considered as belonging to the sons of Job—

[They were living in ease and affluence, happy in their family connexions, and blessed with an abundant measure of harmony in their domestic circle. The apprehension which their father had, lest his sons should by any means have been led to dishonour God in their mirth[b], shews, that they were not, in his opinion at least, possessed of solid piety; whilst, on the other hand, it shewed, that they were not addicted to impiety. Now persons of this description are very numerous: "There is a generation, says Solomon, that are pure in their own eyes, but are not washed from their filthiness[c]:" they fill up their stations in life with credit to themselves, and with benefit to all around them: they are irreproachable in their character, as men of honour and integrity, of kindness and benevolence, of decency and decorum: and in all these respects they are, "like the rush in the mire, green and flourishing."

In their prospects also and their expectations, they are happy. Not anticipating evil, they look forward to fresh gratifications, like travellers in a rich and fertile country. In early youth they form sanguine hopes of settling in the world; and then of advancing their rising families: and thus, having always some fresh object in view, they run their career of pleasure or ambition, and conclude that, at the termination of it, they shall stand as high in the approbation of their God, as they do in the estimation of their ignorant fellow-creatures.]

In their *end* also an especial reference is made to them—

[Those of the foregoing character, whilst living in their proper element, the world, flourish; but when, through illness or misfortunes, they can no longer enjoy the world, like the rush or flag in a season of drought, they wither: they need "not be cut down" by great calamities; small trials suffice to rob them of all their verdure, and to reduce them to a very pitiful and drooping state. "In the fulness of their sufficiency they are in straits[d]:" and they are compelled, however reluctantly, to inscribe on

[b] Ch. i. 5. [c] Prov. xxx. 12. [d] Job xx. 22.

on every created enjoyment, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity and vexation of spirit."

But, if we look to the period of their departure hence, we shall find the text yet more awfully verified in them: then *indeed* "all their hopes perish, even as a spider's web." We have a most remarkable illustration of their state in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man seems to have been much such a character as we suppose these to be; he "lived to the flesh rather than to the Spirit," and "to himself rather than unto God." This was the rich man's sin; (we charge him wrongfully, if we accuse him of avarice or oppression,) and it is the sin of those we are now speaking of[e]: they "*forget God:*" they forget, that God is entitled to all their love, and to all the service which they can possibly render to him: they forget, that, as he is the Author, so he should be also the End, of their being; and that, "whether they eat or drink, or whatever they do, they should have a single eye to his glory." The end of such a course is seen in the rich man; who was no sooner taken from his present enjoyments, than he was cast into hell, where he "lift up his eyes in torments, and intreated in vain for a drop of water to cool his tongue." We find him too requesting that a Messenger might be "sent to his five surviving brethren, to warn them, lest they also should come into the same place of torment:" for then he found, what during his life he would not believe, what must of necessity be the issue of such a life; he found, what all must find, (either now by faith, or hereafter by their own actual experience,) that "the wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the people that *forget God*[f]."]

The comparison in our text will be found no less just, if we consider it,

II. In reference to those who make a hypocritical profession of serving God—

As under the former head we have kept Job's sons in view, so here we must keep Job himself in view.

In Bildad's opinion of *him* we find the true notion of a hypocrite—

[Job had maintained a high reputation for sanctity, and had shewn a great zeal for God's honour *in relation to others;* but, as Bildad erroneously thought, had neglected to consult it himself, or to live agreeably to his avowed principles. This, though not the true character of Job, is a just description of many amongst ourselves: they profess to venerate religion, and shew much zeal in the propagation of it: they pretend also to feel deeply,

[e] Rom. viii. 5. & xiv. 7—9. & 2 Cor. v. 15. [f] Ps. ix. 17.

deeply, when any depart from the good way, and bring a disgrace on their holy profession: but yet they are themselves under the dominion of some besetting sin. They are secretly indulging pride, envy, malice, covetousness, lewdness, or some other bosom lust: they do not live nigh to God in their secret chamber, or aspire after an entire conformity to his will: they are more anxious to appear religious, than to be so, and to be applauded of man, than to be approved of God.

Now these persons, whilst carried on by a conceit of their own superior knowledge of Divine truth, and a desire of establishing a character for piety, are, like the flag in the water, green and flourishing: they seem extremely rapid in their growth; and are regarded, both by themselves and others, as persons of a higher order of being.]

But the hope of all such persons is most delusive—

[It rarely happens that a hypocrite continues long to deceive those who are acquainted with his private habits: he cannot maintain a consistency of character, for want of an inward principle of grace. Like the seed sown in ground where it "had no depth of earth," or like the flag destitute of water, he withers away, and exposes both himself and religion to general contempt. For the truth of this we may appeal to the records of former ages; yea, "though we are of yesterday and know nothing," as it were, we must have seen it but too frequently in our own day[g]; that persons of high expectation have declined from the right path, and "made shipwreck either of faith or of a good conscience." As Lot's wife was a monument in the Old Testament, so is Demas in the New: and similar monuments are yet found in every Church.

But let us follow the hypocrite also into the eternal world: what is his condition *there?* Alas! alas! however high he was in his own estimation or in that of others, he is now fallen *indeed;* and all his towering hopes are now swept away with the besom of destruction[h]. Even whilst he is here carrying on his deception, though it be unsuspected by himself or others, and though his hypocrisy be not in *act*, but in *heart* only, he is "treasuring up wrath for himself" against "the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Christ Jesus[i]." Possibly he may carry his confidence with him into the eternal world, and almost presume to expostulate with his Judge: but "he will say to them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity[k]:" and then shall their state be so superlatively wretched, that they who sink the deepest into perdition are said to "take their portion with the hypocrites."]

O that

[g] ver. 8—10.
[h] See ch. xx. 4—7.
[i] Job xxxvi. 13.
[k] Matt. vii. 22, 23.

O that we might all LEARN from this subject,

1. The importance of piety—

[We are not disposed to undervalue the blessings of worldly prosperity, or domestic happiness: but in comparison of eternal blessedness we must needs say, that every thing in this world is only as the dust of the balance. Yet the highest ambition of parents for their children is, to see them precisely in the way that Job's children were, all with separate establishments, living in sweet harmony with each other, and in the vicinity of their parents, where all as one family, may augment and enjoy the happiness of the whole. This state also is regarded by young persons of both sexes as the summit of their ambition. But even in this life we see how soon their gourd may be withered by a worm at the root: and after this life, nothing remains of it, but a fearful responsibility for every hour that has been spent in a forgetfulness of God. Indeed, indeed, however the ungodly may scoff at piety, there is nothing that deserves a thought in comparison of it. If the whole world be no adequate price for one single soul, it is madness to be bartering away our souls, as so many do, for the veriest trifles that can be presented to our view. To all then, and especially to the young, I would say, Remember God; "remember your Creator in the days of youth" or health; and let "the life which you now live in the flesh, be by faith in the Son of God, who loved you and gave himself for you." But, if you are still disposed to hold fast your delusive expectations, go and sweep away a spider's web, and then *reflect, how suddenly, and irreversibly, it is destroyed.* Then say with yourself, Such is my hope, and such will ere long be the termination of it. "O consider this, ye that forget God, lest HE tear *you* in pieces, and there be none to deliver you[l]."]

2. The danger of self-deception—

[All see how others deceive themselves; yet none, of whatever class, imagine themselves to be in any great danger of self-delusion. But St. James tells us, that we may "seem to be religious," and persuade ourselves that we are so, and yet "deceive our own souls, and have our religion vain[m]." O remember, that we live in a deceitful world, and have an adversary whose wills and devices are inconceivably subtle; and that our own "hearts also are deceitful above all things and desperately wicked:" and let the consideration of these things make you "jealous over yourselves with a godly jealousy." Be not too confident that all is right with you; but say with Paul, "Though I know nothing by myself, yet am I not hereby justified; but he that judgeth me is the Lord[n]." Yet, if you have "the testimony of your own conscience that with simplicity and godly sincerity you have your conversation

[l] Ps. l. 22. [m] Jam. i. 26. [n] 1 Cor. iv. 4.

conversation in the world, you may rejoice in it[o]:" only "rejoice with trembling[p];" and, bearing in mind that "God requireth truth in the inward parts[q]," beg of him to search and try you[r]," and to make you "Israelites indeed, in whom there is no guile."]

[o] 2 Cor. i. 12. [p] Ps. ii. 11.
[q] Ps. li. 6. [r] Ps. cxxxix. 23, 24.

CCCIX.

THE FOLLY OF SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS AND PRESUMPTION.

Job ix. 2—4. *How should man be just with God? If he will contend with him, he cannot answer him one of a thousand. He is wise in heart, and mighty in strength: who hath hardened against him, and hath prospered?*

THE fundamental doctrines of our holy religion are not like the deductions of human reason, which leave a degree of doubt upon the mind: they correspond with something within us, which contributes to assure us that the things which we have received upon the Divine testimony are unquestionably true. The inspired writers indeed, knowing by whom they were inspired, delivered without hesitation those things of which they had no internal evidence, as well as those which were confirmed by their own experience. Nevertheless there is a peculiar energy in their mode of declaring experimental truths: they make them a subject of appeal to their very enemies, and challenge the whole universe to deny the things whereof they affirm. Thus it was with Job. Bildad had charged him with asserting his own perfect innocence, and accusing God as unjust in his proceedings towards him; "Doth God pervert judgment? or doth the Almighty pervert justice?" Job, in his reply, allowed the premises of his opponent, but denied the consequences which were deduced from it: "I know it so of a truth;" that is, I know God will not pervert justice: "but" I deny that I ever intended to justify myself before God, or to harden myself against him; for I am as fully convinced

vinced of the folly of acting in such a manner, as you or any one else can be: "How can man, &c. &c."

In this reply Job strongly asserts two things;

I. The folly of justifying ourselves before God—

Many there are who justify themselves before God—

[Few indeed, if any, will deny that they have sinned: but all unregenerate persons will deny that they deserve the wrath of God: at least, if, on account of some flagrant transgression, they be constrained to confess themselves obnoxious to eternal punishment, they hope by some repentance or reformation to compensate for their sins, and to establish a righteousness whereby they may find acceptance with God.]

But this proceeds from an ignorance of the Divine law—

["The law of God is perfect[a];" "the commandment is exceeding broad[b]:" it extends not to actions only, but to the thoughts and desires of the heart[c]; and it requires perfect and perpetual obedience[d]. On our failure in any one particular, it denounces a curse against us[e]; and from that period it can never justify us. It admits of no repentance on our part, or relaxation on God's part[f]. It is as immutable as God himself: and it is owing to men's ignorance of this law that they so foolishly build upon it as the foundation of their hopes.]

None who understand this law will ever look for justification from it—

[If amongst a thousand perfect actions, *one* only were found defective, it were sufficient to condemn us for ever. But, if we will try ourselves by the law, we shall not find "one action of a thousand," no, nor one in our whole lives, that will not condemn us. If we should presume to "contend with God" respecting the perfection of our best action, how soon would he confound us! Even *we* will venture to expose the folly of such presumption. Bring forth your action to the light: was there nothing amiss in *its principle*, nothing defective in *the manner*, nothing of a selfish mixture in *its end?* See if you can answer a weak sinful creature like yourselves: and, if you can not, how will you "answer" the pure heart-searching "God?"

See then the folly of hoping ever to "be just with God;" and

[a] Ps. xix. 7. [b] Ps. cxix. 96.

[c] "Thou shalt not *covet*," i. e. Thou shalt not *harbour*, thou shalt not even *have*, an inordinate desire, Rom. vii. 7.

[d] Gal. iii. 10. [e] ib. [f] Matt. v. 18.

and adopt the language of David, "Enter not into judgment with thy servant; for in thy sight shall no man living be justified[g]."]

But there is another point in the text to which we must advert, namely,

II. The folly of hardening ourselves against God—

Those who justify themselves before God are equally prone to harden themselves against him—

[This they do by their *unbelief* and *impenitence*: they will not give credit to the declarations of God concerning them: they think, in direct opposition to all that God has spoken, that he will never execute his threatenings against the transgressors of his law. They profess to hope that repentance will appease his anger; and yet they put off their repentance from year to year, and take occasion, even from his mercy to sin the more against him.]

The folly of this appears,

1. From the character of God—

[If God were ignorant of what passes in our minds, or unable to punish us for our sins, we need not concern ourselves so much about him. But are "the thick clouds a covering to him, so that he cannot see us[h]?" or "are we stronger than he, so that we can provoke him to jealousy[i]?" without any fear of his resentment? No: "he is wise in heart, and mighty in strength:" he beholds the most secret emotions of our hearts, and will surely call us into judgment for them. What folly is it then to "harden ourselves against him," when "neither rocks nor mountains can conceal us from him," nor the whole universe combined deliver us from his hands[k]!]

2. From the experience of men—

["Who amongst all the sons of men ever prospered," while he lived in an impenitent and unbelieving state? Many indeed have been wealthy and powerful[l]; but who ever had solid *peace in his conscience?* Who ever had real *comfort in a dying hour?* Who ever had *happiness in the eternal world?* This is the only prosperity that deserves our notice; and, in this view of it, the question in the text is unanswerable.

But, if we cannot tell of one that prospered, can we not recount multitudes that have been marked as objects of God's most signal vengeance? Was not the rebellious Pharaoh visited with ten successive plagues, and drowned at last, with all his army,

[g] Ps. xix. 12. & xl. 12. & cxxx. 3. & cxliii. 2.
[h] Job xxii. 13, 14. [i] 1 Cor. x. 22. [k] Dan. iv. 37. Prov. xi. 21.
[l] Ps. lxxiii. 3—12.

army, in the Red Sea[m]? Was not the vain-glorious Nebuchadnezzar changed, as it were, into a beast for the space of seven years for his impious boasting against God[n]? Was not his son Belshazzar warned by a hand-writing on the wall, in the midst of his lewd, drunken, and blaspheming revels; and, agreeably to the prediction, dethroned and slain that very night[o]? But why do we mention individual instances, when we are told, that "every one who, after repeated reproofs, hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy[p]." Who that considers this denunciation, must not confess, that such opposition to a God of infinite wisdom and power is madness itself?]

These things then being clear, the following ADVICE cannot but approve itself to the consciences of all—

1. Be attentive to the concerns of your souls—

[To "repent, and believe the Gospel," was the advice which Jesus himself gave to his hearers: and it is as necessary for you as it was for them. But it may be thought that an attention to spiritual concerns will interfere with your worldly prosperity. This however is not a necessary consequence: there can be no doubt but that, if you serve God faithfully, the world will hate you: but prudence and diligence may advance your temporal interests even in spite of the world's hatred. Be it so, however: your temporal and spiritual welfare, we will say, are in direct opposition to each other: can it be doubted which you should prefer? Is not the soul of more value than ten thousand worlds? Seek then the prosperity which God approves, and which will continue for ever.]

2. Study the Gospel in particular—

[It is the Gospel alone that can enable you to answer that important question, "How shall man be just with God?" That takes your eyes off from human attainments, and directs them to the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is there set forth as a propitiation for sin, that, through him, God may be just, and yet the justifier of penitent and believing sinners[q]." From thence you learn, that Christ's obedience unto death is a sufficient plea against all the accusations of God's law; and that, if you be washed in his blood, God himself will not behold in you the least spot or blemish[r]. It was from "the Gospel as originally preached to Abraham," that *he* found out the method of a sinner's acceptance with God[s]. All the Apostles acquiesced in this way of salvation: they all renounced their own works in point

[m] Exod. ix. 17. & xiv. 17, 28.
[n] Dan. v. 20, 21.
[o] ib. ver. 22—28, 30.
[p] Prov. xxix. 1.
[q] Rom. iii. 24, 25.
[r] Eph. v. 25—27.
[s] Gal. iii. 6—9.

point of dependence, and sought for mercy through faith in Christ[t]. Let the Gospel then, whether as written by the first Ministers of Christ, or as preached by those who now follow their steps, be your meditation and delight: so shall you find support under the most accumulated trials, and be accepted of your God in the day of judgment.]

[t] Gal. ii. 15, 16.

CCCX.

THE EVIL OF A SELF-JUSTIFYING SPIRIT.

Job ix. 20, 21. *If I justify myself, mine own mouth shall condemn me: if I say, I am perfect, it shall also prove me perverse. Though I were perfect, yet would I not know my soul: I would despise my life.*

IN controversies of every kind, and more especially on those which relate to religion, the disputants are, for the most part, more anxious to obtain the victory than to discover truth. Hence, instead of putting that precise construction on each other's words which they were designed to bear, they labour to turn to their own advantage every expression of their adversary, and to derive from it an argument for the support of their own cause. Even good men are by no means so candid as they ought to be in relation to this matter, more especially when they become heated by opposition. The friends of Job were exceedingly faulty in this particular. They first charged Job with hypocrisy; and then, when he asserted his own innocence in relation to that heinous sin, they represented him as asserting his freedom from *all* sin, and as justifying himself as a righteous person before God. This was by no means the intention of Job: on the contrary, he here explicitly declares, that "no man can be just before God[a]," and that he should stand utterly self-condemned if he should presume to arrogate to himself any such measure of perfection. He had stated in the foregoing verse, that if he should dare to contend with God, he could neither withstand his power, nor put himself

[a] ver. 2.

himself into a capacity to make good his cause before him[b]: and now he renounces with abhorrence any such impious idea. Of the former verse of our text, this is the plain and obvious meaning: and in the latter verse, the same idea seems yet more strongly, though not so plainly, stated: "Though I were perfect," so far as not to be aware of any evil that I had ever committed, "yet would I not know my soul," or pretend to know it as the heart-searching God does: "I would despise my own life," and submit to any death, rather than presume to offer such an insult to the Majesty of heaven. Thus he avows, in opposition to the charge that had been brought against him, first, *the folly*, and next, *the impiety*, of a self-justifying spirit. These two we propose to consider in their order:

I. The folly of a self-justifying spirit—

By a self-justifying spirit we understand, a persuasion of mind that we do not deserve God's wrath and indignation, but, on the contrary, that we do deserve his favour and blessing. Now supposing a person to indulge this spirit, what does he, in fact, affirm? He affirms, if not in words, yet by clear inference, what "his mouth must utterly condemn." He affirms,

1. That there is no truth in the Scriptures—

[The Scriptures in every part either affirm, or take for granted, that man is a sinner, justly condemned, and standing in need of mercy at the hands of an offended God. Now to talk of perfection, or of being righteous before God, is to assert directly the reverse of what the Scriptures assert, and, consequently, to say that there is no truth in them. But will any one dare to speak thus concerning the sacred oracles? Will not his own mouth instantly condemn him as a proud and wicked infidel? or, if he profess to believe the holy Scriptures, and yet maintain the notion of his being righteous before God, will not his own mouth still condemn him as guilty of the grossest inconsistency? Believer or unbeliever, he must equally stand self-refuted, and self-condemned.]

2. That there is no sin in his heart—

[We ask not whether there be any flagrant iniquities that can be laid to his charge: it is sufficient if once, in ever so small

[b] ver. 19.

small a degree, in act, word, or thought, He have transgressed, or fallen short of, the perfect law of God: having offended thus far, he has broken the law, and is from that moment subjected to its curse[c]. Now to be justified by the very law that condemns us, is a contradiction in terms: so that the person who pretends to be just before God must either deny that he has any sin in his heart, or maintain the contradiction before stated. If it be said, that he may imagine that the law admits of imperfections, and justifies us notwithstanding those imperfections, we answer, that we cannot make laws of our own, but must take the law as we find it: and that the law, being a perfect transcript of God's mind and will, can be satisfied with nothing but perfect and perpetual obedience: and consequently, if ever we have transgressed it in the smallest measure, we are, and must for ever be, condemned by it. To deny the perfection of the law would be to deny the perfection of God, which is Atheism: and to admit its perfection, and yet dream of justification by it, is such an absurdity, as every man's own mouth must condemn. The only possible ground of being justified by it must be, that we have no sin in our hearts: and, if any man dare affirm that, his own mouth has already proved him most ignorant and perverse[cc].]

3. That he has no need of a Saviour—

[If he be righteous himself, he has no need to be clothed in another's righteousness, nor any need of an atonement for his sins: consequently, as far at least as relates to that individual, God has sent his own Son in vain. And will any man say that God, in making his Son "a propitiation for the sins of the whole world," was under a mistake, and that for himself he needed no such exercise of mercy? Why then does such a man call himself a Christian? If he stood in no need of Christ, and is in a state of justification without Christ, he should cease to "name the name of Christ:" for whilst he continues to do so, his own mouth condemns him, and proves him perverse. "If righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain[d]."]

But let us proceed to notice,

II. The impiety of it—

It was not without good reason that Job expressed such an abhorrence of the spirit that was imputed to him: for the indulging of it is,

1. A criminating of God—

[There is not a perfection of the Deity which is not dishonoured by a self-justifying spirit. It impeaches and vilifies his truth; seeing that he has represented all to be in a state of guilt and condemnation before him. It denies his justice; since he threatens

[c] Gal. iii. 10. [cc] 1 John i. 8. [d] Gal. ii. 21.

threatens all men with death, when there are some who do not deserve it. It degrades his wisdom; since it supposes that that wonderful contrivance of providing a surety for us, and laying our sins upon him, was unnecessary. It holds up to derision also his mercy and grace, which are proclaimed as incomprehensibly great and glorious, when the very offer of them is only an empty sound. Hear what God himself says: "If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a LIAR[e]." Can any thing be conceived more heinous than this? Should we not "despise our own lives," and submit to ten thousand deaths, rather than be guilty of it?]

2. A contempt of our own souls—

[God has provided a salvation for us, and offered it freely to all who will accept it in and through his beloved Son; and has told us, that "there is no other name under heaven whereby we can be saved," but that of Jesus; and yet we choose to ground our claim of happiness on the purity and perfection of our own character, rather than submit to be saved in his appointed way. But is not this madness? Will a man deal so with his temporal interests? will he risk the loss of them upon a mere phantom of his own imagination, in direct opposition to the plainest dictates of his understanding? Surely, if men had the least value for their souls, they would not so trifle with them; they would at least endeavour to ascertain what degree of weight was due to their opinions, and whether there was any rational ground for them to expect God's blessing in a way so contrary to his own most express and solemn declarations. But their total indifference about the issue of their confidence shews, that they account their souls of no value, or, as Solomon expresses it, "they despise their own souls[f]."]

3. A trampling under foot the Son of God—

[This is God's own representation of the sin. In rejecting the sacrifice of Christ, there being no other sacrifice, we cut ourselves off from all hope of salvation; yea, "we trample under foot the Son of God, and count the blood of the covenant an unholy thing, and do despite to the Spirit of grace[g]." What amazing impiety is this! We are apt to confine our ideas of impiety to gross sins committed against our fellow-creatures: and such an error as self-righteousness we suppose to be of very little importance. But it is not thus that God estimates sin: he views sin chiefly as it dishonours him, and more especially as it militates against that stupendous effort of his love, the redemption of the world by the blood and righteousness of his beloved Son. Know then, that to justify ourselves, is to repeat, in fact, the conduct of those who crucified the Lord of Glory; it is to "crucify him afresh,"

[e] 1 John i. 10. [f] Prov. xv. 32. [g] Heb. x. 26—29.

afresh," and to say, "We will not have this man to reign over us."]

This subject may be further IMPROVED,

1. For our conviction—

[Who was it that used the language in our text? It was Job, of whom God himself testified, that "he was a perfect and upright man." And if *he* could not justify himself before God, who are *we*, that *we* should presume to do so? Are we more perfect than he? Hear how he speaks of himself, a few verses after our text[h]; and then see what our views of ourselves should be. Nor was Job singular in his views of himself: the language of all the most eminent saints, both in the Old and New Testament, is precisely similar[i]——— And such must be ours also, if ever we would find mercy at the hands of God: we must "humble ourselves, if ever we would be exalted."]

2. For our consolation—

[Some are discouraged at the sight of their own vileness, and are ready to think that such unworthy creatures as they can never be saved. And such thoughts they might well have, if justification were, either in whole or in part, by any righteousness of our own. But "we are to be justified freely by God's grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus[k]:" it is "*the ungodly* whom God justifies[l];" not indeed those who *continue* ungodly, but those who come to Christ in an ungodly state, desiring to be cleansed from the guilt and power of their sins: those persons are justified the very moment they believe in Jesus, and *that* too from all the sins they have ever committed[m]. Here indeed is abundant consolation for "the weary and heavy-laden" sinner; here indeed he may find rest unto his soul. Remember then what the Apostle has said; "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners:" and that Paul himself, when he was a bloody persecutor and blasphemer, obtained mercy, on purpose that the extent and riches of God's grace might be displayed in him, as a pattern and encouragement to all who should ever desire acceptance with their offended God[n]. Follow his example then, and believe in Jesus for the remission of your sins: say, as the Prophet encourages you to do, "In the Lord Jesus have I righteousness and strength;" for "in the Lord shall all the seed of Israel be justified, and in him shall they glory[o]." The very name by which the Lord Jesus himself delights to be called, is, "The Lord our Righteousness[p]."]

[h] ver. 30, 31.

[i] See Ps. cxxx. 3. & cxliii. 2. Prov. xx. 9. Isai. vi. 5. & lxiv. 6. Phil. iii. 4—9. & especially 1 Cor. iv. 4.

[k] Rom. iii. 24—26. [l] Rom. iv. 5. [m] Acts xiii. 39.

[n] 1 Tim. i. 15, 16. [o] Isai. xlv. 24, 25. [p] Jer. xxiii. 6.

CCCXI.

IMPATIENCE REPROVED.

Job x. 1. *My soul is weary of my life.*

LIFE is justly esteemed a blessing: and we are properly taught in the Liturgy to thank God, as well for our creation, as for our preservation, and redemption. But to the greater part of mankind this world is a checquered scene at best; and to very many it is only a vale of tears. Had we seen Job in his prosperity, we should have been led perhaps to form a more favourable estimate of the present state: but there are changes in the affairs of men, as much as in the air and seas: and the day that dawned with the most promising appearance, may be overcast with clouds, and blackened with tempests, ere the sun has reached its meridian height. Thus it was with Job: the man that was the envy of all who knew him, was in a short space of time so reduced, as to exclaim, "My soul is weary of my life."

We shall,

I. Shew that this is a common experience—

Daily observation proves that it is common,

1. Among the ungodly—

[It arises from *domestic* trials. Who can tell what trouble a tyrannical or unfaithful husband, a contentious or imprudent wife, a rebellious or extravagant son, an indiscreet or unchaste daughter, may occasion? There is scarce a family to be found, where something does not happen to embitter life, and to make death, either to the head or members, an object of desire.

From *personal* troubles also the same disquietude will spring. *Pain and sickness*, when of long continuance, and especially when accompanied with the infirmities of age, cause many to wish for a speedy dissolution. Embarrassed circumstances too will so oppress the spirits, particularly when occasioned by one's own extravagance or folly, as to make the soul weary of life: yea, to such a degree are the minds of men oppressed by troubles of this kind, that a deliverance from them is not unfrequently sought in suicide. Even *a mere sense of the emptiness of all earthly things* will often fill the soul with disgust, and cause it to sigh for a release from the body, in which it finds no satisfactory

satisfactory enjoyment. Many, in the midst[a] of youth, health, and affluence, while moving in a constant round of amusements, and free from every external trouble, are yet so weary of life, that they would gladly part with it immediately, if they were not afraid of entering into the invisible world. But, above all, *a guilty conscience* renders man "a burthen to himself." A person "weary and heavy-laden" with a sense of sin, and not knowing where to go for rest, is indeed a pitiable object. He wishes that he had never been born, or that he could be again reduced to a state of non-existence. If he might but be annihilated like the beasts, he would gladly accept the offer, and most thankfully forego all hope of heaven, to obtain deliverance from the fears of hell.]

2. Among the godly—

[Not even the most eminent saints are altogether free from this experience. They are not, whilst in the flesh, above the reach of *temporal* afflictions. They are not indeed overcome by every little trouble, like those who know not God: but they are not insensible to pain or pleasure: they have their feelings, as well as other men. Pains of body, loss of substance, bereavements of friends, injuries from enemies, may, when accumulated, cast them down; and produce, as in the case of Job, extreme dejection.

The weight of *spiritual* troubles is felt by these exclusively: nor can those who have never experienced their pressure, form any just conception respecting them. Who can describe the anguish that is occasioned by *violent temptations, headstrong corruptions, unsuccessful conflicts?* What language can paint the distress of a soul under *the hidings of God's face*, and the apprehensions of his wrath? Can we wonder that a person long exercised with such trials, should say, "Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest[a]"? Surely "the spirit of a man may sustain other infirmities; but a wounded spirit who can bear[b]?"]

The commonness of this experience may well lead us to,

II. Inquire into the reasons of it—

Many reasons may be assigned, but we shall limit ourselves to a few:

1. Impatience—

[Job, whose patience is celebrated even by God himself, when borne down by the weight of his afflictions, cursed the day of his birth[c], and longed exceedingly for death[d]; and would have been glad to have had a period put to his existence, even by strangling, rather

[a] Ps. lv. 4—6. [b] Prov. xviii. 14. [c] Job iii. 1—22.
[d] Job vi. 8, 9.

rather than to have it protracted any longer in such misery[e]. To the same source we must trace those hasty wishes, which we also are ready to form in seasons of great calamity. If "patience had its perfect work in us," we should be willing to bear whatever God might see fit to lay upon us. But "in the day of adversity the strongest of us are too apt to faint."

2. Unbelief—

[From this more particularly arose that weariness and aversion to life which the prophet Elijah manifested, when he fled from Jezebel. He had encountered Ahab, and slain all the prophets of Baal, in dependence on the Divine protection: but when this wicked woman menaced him, he staid not to take counsel of the Lord, but instantly fled into the wilderness; and, to get rid of all his dangers and difficulties at once, requested God to kill him[f]. Had he felt the same security in God as on former occasions, he would have been quite composed, knowing assuredly that without God's permission not a hair of his head could fall to the ground. Thus when afflictions render us weary of life, we shew that we have forgotten the promise of Jehovah to make all things work together for our good. When we know that medicine is operating for our good, we disregard the uneasiness that it occasions: we are contented even to pay for the prescriptions, from a confidence that we shall be benefited by them in the issue. And should we not welcome the prescriptions of our heavenly Physician, if we duly considered his unerring wisdom, goodness, and truth? Instead of repining and murmuring on account of his dispensations, we should rest satisfied, that every additional trouble would only call forth additional displays of his power and love.]

3. A forgetfulness of our real desert—.

[Man, as a sinner, deserves the curse of the law, and the wrath of God. Suppose we bore this in mind, should we not say, even under the most accumulated trials, "Thou hast punished us less than our iniquities deserve[g]?" Would not a recollection of our desert of death and hell constrain us to cry, "Shall a *living* man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins[h]?" Would Jonah have been so clamorous for death, and so ready to justify his impatience before God[i], if he had considered what he merited at God's hands? So neither should we be so fretful under our sufferings, if only we bore in mind, that, instead of being put into the furnace of affliction, we should, if dealt with according to our deserts, be cast into the flames of hell. We should learn rather to adopt the sentiment of the Church of old, "I will

[e] Job vii. 15, 16. [f] 1 Kin. xix. 4. [g] Ezra ix. 13.
[h] Lam. iii. 39. [i] Jon. iv. 2, 3, 8, 9.

"I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him[k]."]

4. A disregard of the great ends of life—

[It is truly humiliating to find not only such querulous, and almost doubtful, characters as Jonah, but the bold Elijah, the pious David, the patient Job, fainting in their trials, and longing for their dismission from the body. But to this catalogue we must add another, even Moses, the meekest of mankind. Even this holy man, unable to bear up under the burthens imposed upon him, complains of them to God, and says, "If thou deal thus with me, I pray thee to kill me out of hand[l]." Would he have offered such a petition if he had reflected on the benefits which had already accrued to Israel by his means, and, humanly speaking, the incalculable loss which they would sustain by his removal? And should not we also be more willing to endure our trials, if we considered what valuable ends might be promoted by our continuance under them? Perhaps we are not prepared to die; (for persons are most apt to wish for death when they are least prepared to meet it;) and would we, for the sake of extricating ourselves from some earthly trouble, plunge ourselves, both body and soul, into the everlasting miseries of hell? But, supposing that we are prepared, may not others be greatly edified by our example, our counsels, and our prayers? May not our own weight of glory also be greatly increased, by a due improvement of our light and momentary afflictions[m]? Is not this last consideration alone sufficient to reconcile us to a prolonging of our troubles, and a deferring of our heavenly felicity[n]? We may indeed be in a strait betwixt the two; but we shall, like St. Paul, be willing to live, when we reflect how much better that may be both for ourselves and others[o].]

Towards lessening this common evil, we shall,

III. Prescribe some remedies for it—

The painful experience before described may be mitigated, and in many cases wholly prevented, by,

1. A due attention to our worldly callings—

[Persons under the pressure of heavy afflictions are apt to give themselves up to sorrow, and to neglect the proper duties of their calling. By this means their minds become more and more

[k] Mic. vii. 9. [l] Numb. xi. 14, 15. [m] 2 Cor. iv. 17.

[n] For this sublime idea the author is in a measure indebted to a poor woman (so poor as to be supported by the parish), who, when in great pain and almost in dying circumstances, replied (in answer to what he had suggested respecting the rest and happiness that awaited her), "True, Sir, but *in some respects affliction is better than even heaven itself*; for &c. &c." [o] Phil. i. 23, 24.

more enervated; their spirits sink, and they fall a prey to their sorrows: they die of a broken heart. But if, instead of thus yielding to lowness of spirits, they would employ themselves in their accustomed duties, their occupations would divert their attention from their troubles, and give scope and opportunity to the mind to recover its proper tone. Whether the troubles be of a temporal or spiritual nature, this remedy should be applied. We must not indeed go and plunge ourselves into business or amusement in order to get rid of reflection, (*that* would be to run into a contrary extreme;) but we should never be so occupied with our sufferings as to forget or neglect our duties. It is remarkable, that when God repeated to the fugitive prophet that expostulatory question, "What doest thou here, Elijah?" he ordered him, not to sit any longer wishing for death, but to go about the business which yet remained for him to do; namely, to return to Damascus, and anoint Hazael to be king of Syria, and Jehu to be king of Israel, and Elisha to be his successor in the prophetic office[p]. And in the same manner it becomes us, not to sit wishing for the spoils of victory, but to continue fighting till God shall call us to put off our armour.]

2. A close walk with God—

[Strange it is, that heavy trials which are sent to bring us *to* God, often prevail rather to drive us *from* him. We complain, "We are so overwhelmed with trouble, that we cannot think of our souls, or compose our minds for supplication to God." But we are particularly commanded to "call on God *in the time of trouble*[q]; and to "cast all our care upon Him, who careth for us[r]: and we see in the instance of St. Paul how speedily our sorrows might be turned into joy, if only we would use this remedy[s]. Surely one ray of the light of his countenance would dissipate all our darkness, and change our impatient murmurings into "thanksgiving and the voice of melody." If we were bowed down with a sense of guilt, one glimpse of Christ should remove the load from our conscience. If we were harassed with the fiercest temptations or most overwhelming fears, one word from him should quiet the tempestuous ocean, and qualify us for encountering all the storms wherewith we might at any time be overtaken.]

3. A frequent survey of heaven—

[A view of heaven would indeed excite desires after the full enjoyment of it. But this is very different from the experience which is described in the text. Our longings after heaven cannot be too ardent, provided we are contented to wait God's time in order to possess it[t]. This is an important distinction, and most accurately marked by the apostle Paul. He

[p] 1 Kin. xix. 15, 16. [q] Ps. l. 15. [r] 1 Pet. v. 7.
[s] 2 Cor. xii. 7—10. [t] 2 Pet. iii. 12.

He knew that heaven was the portion prepared for him; and he earnestly desired to enjoy it[u]: but these desires did not spring from an impatient wish to get rid of his troubles, or to terminate his conflicts, but from a thirst after God himself, and the perfect fruition of his glory[x]. Now *this* would be a most effectual remedy against the other: the brighter views we had of the glory that awaits us, the less we should regard the sufferings of this present time[y]. If the years of labour and servitude appeared to Jacob only as a few days, because of the love he bore to Rachel, and the desire he had to possess her as his wife[z], so will the tribulations which are appointed as our way to the kingdom[a] appear of little concern, when we look to the end of our journey, and the felicity we shall then enjoy.]

[u] 2 Cor. v. 1—3. [x] ib. ver. 4. [y] Rom. viii. 18.
[z] Gen. xxix. 20. [a] Acts xiv. 22.

CCCXII.

CONSCIOUS INTEGRITY.

Job x. 7. *Thou knowest that I am not wicked.*

PAINFUL as the consideration of God's omniscience must be to the wicked, it is a rich source of consolation to those who are upright before him. Circumstances may arise, wherein they may not be able fully to vindicate their character to the world, even though they are perfectly innocent of the things laid to their charge. The defilement also which they sometimes contract by reason of their in-dwelling corruptions may be such as to excite fears respecting the state of their souls; while they are maintaining a strenuous conflict with the whole body of sin. In such cases it will be a satisfaction to them to reflect, that their very inmost souls are naked and open before God; and that he can discern the integrity of their hearts, even when most clouded, either by unreasonable suspicions, or just occasions of doubt. From this source Job drew his consolation, when the dispensations of Providence seemed to justify his friends in accusing him of hypocrisy: he could then appeal to God, and say "Thou knowest that I am not wicked."

We

We propose to shew,

I. What we are to understand by this appeal—

Job never intended to assert that he was possessed of sinless perfection—

[God had indeed honoured him with the title of a "perfect man." But in the very same place, the import of the term "perfect" is limited and explained by the word "upright" united to it[a]. Perfection, in the Scripture use of the word, relates rather to our desires than our attainments; and denotes that growth in grace, which is found in those who have arrived at the full stature of a Christian, as distinguished from a state of infantine weakness, or youthful inexperience. That Job did not deny himself to be a sinner, or still to be encompassed with sinful infirmities, is evident from the whole of the preceding context, where he repeatedly acknowledges, and deeply bewails, his own depravity[b]. Indeed his spirit at this time was by no means free from sinful impatience[bb]; so that, if he had boasted of sinless perfection, he would have opposed the whole tenor of Scripture[c], and his own mouth would have condemned him, and proved him perverse.]

But he appealed to God,

1. That he was free from the sin imputed to him—

[Job's friends imagined, that heavy judgments were never sent except as punishments of some enormous wickedness. What evils Job had been guilty of, they could not tell: but, as they saw him so grievously afflicted, they concluded that he must have indulged some secret wickedness, which God now intended to disclose and punish. They therefore, at a venture, accused him of hypocrisy[d]. But he repelled the charge, and asserted, in opposition to them, his own innocence[dd].]

2. That he was, on the whole, upright before God—

[He had unfeignedly endeavoured to serve and please God; nor did his conscience accuse him of allowedly indulging sin. In hopes therefore that the solemnity of an appeal to God would convince and satisfy his friends, he presumed to address the Deity in the words of our text. Nor was this without an evident propriety: for, as the troubles which proceeded from God were considered as a testimony against him, he could not clear himself better than by appealing to the Author of those troubles for a testimony

[a] Job i. 8. [b] Ch. vii. 20. & ix. 20, 21, 30, 31. [bb] ver. 3.
[c] 1 Kin. viii. 46. Jam. iii. 2. 1 John i. 8.
[d] Ch. viii. 13, 14, 20.
[dd] David did the same. See Ps. vii. 3, 8. & xxvi. 1, 6. & Paul: see 1 Thess. ii. 10.

testimony in his favour. To have done this merely to cover his guilt, would have been madness: for if he was already suffering the rebukes of God on account of his hypocrisy, he could expect nothing but a tenfold load of misery as the reward of such aggravated impiety. Such an appeal therefore to the heart-searching God, upon a subject of which none but God could judge, was the best, and indeed the only means, of re-establishing his character in the good opinion of his friends.]

But, that we may not be too hasty in making such an appeal, let us consider,

II. What is necessary to warrant it—

We ought to have the testimony of our own conscience,

1. That we are free from all allowed sin—

[If we allow ourselves in any sin, we are servants of sin[e]; we belong to Satan[f]; we have no interest in the covenant of grace[g]; yea, even the prayers we offer in such a state are an abomination to the Lord[h]. It matters not whether the sin be open or secret, great or small; if we indulge it willingly, we oppose the authority of God, which is equally displayed in every commandment. It is no excuse to say, that such or such an indulgence is conducive to our comfort, or necessary to our welfare: if it be as useful as a right hand, or as precious as a right eye, we can never be sincere, if we do not pluck it out or cut it off, and cast it from us[i]. In order to say with truth, "I am not wicked," we must have "a single eye[j]," and be Israelites indeed, without guile[k].]

2. That we endeavour habitually to approve ourselves to God—

[We may approve ourselves to our fellow-creatures, while there is much iniquity harboured in our hearts. If we would have a good conscience, we must act, not to men, but to God: God's will must be the reason, his word the rule, and his glory the end, of our obedience[l]. We must have as much respect to our motives and inclinations as to our words and actions; we must be careful to purge out all leaven[n], and to have the very thoughts of our hearts brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ[m]. Without this we cannot say, "I am not wicked;" for that which is the root and summit of all wickedness

[e] Rom. vi. 16. [f] 1 John iii. 8. [g] Rom. vi. 14.
[h] Ps. lxvi. 18. Prov. xxviii. 9. [i] Matt. v. 29, 30.
[j] Matt. vi. 22. [k] John i. 47. [l] Col. iii. 23.
[n] Luke xii. 1. 1 Cor. v. 7, 8. [m] 2 Cor. x. 5.

ness abides within us: we have "a carnal mind that is enmity against God[n]:" and however clean we may be in the outward appearance, we are inwardly like whited sepulchres, full of rottenness and all uncleanness[o].]

But in proportion to the difficulty of making this appeal is,

III. The blessedness of being able to make it—

Certainly such a consciousness of our own integrity must be a rich consolation to us,

1. Under any troubles that may come upon us—

[Under the pressure of any heavy calamity, when God seems as if he were "bringing our sins to remembrance," and especially in times of persecution, when our characters are traduced, and we are regarded as the most worthless of mankind, we find it a most painful addition to our grief if we think that we have brought the trial on ourselves by some misconduct of our own. But if, in either of these cases, we can appeal to God that we have sought only his glory, and endeavoured to approve ourselves to him, we shall feel our trials greatly alleviated, and our spirits calmed. Never was man more cruelly aspersed, or more virulently persecuted, than the apostle Paul: yet the reflection that God knew his heart, and approved his conduct, made it appear "a light matter to him to be judged of man's judgment[p]." A similar consciousness will be productive of similar composure in all our minds[pp].]

2. In the prospect of death and judgment—

[None who have guilt upon their conscience can look forward to these seasons without pain and dread. But to him who can make this appeal to God, death and judgment have lost all their terrors. He has within himself an earnest of the felicity that awaits him. The judgment has already passed, as it were, with respect to him; and, while others have only a fearful looking-for of judgment and fiery indignation to consume them, he "knows that he has a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens[q]." Not being condemned in his own heart, he has a just and Scriptural confidence towards God[r].]

ADDRESS—

1. Those who are living in any known sin—

[Perhaps you have contrived so well, that you can defy man to lay any particular evil to your charge. But what will that avail, while God beholds the secret abominations of your hearts? To what

[n] Rom. viii. 7. [o] Matt. xxiii. 27, 28. [p] 1 Cor. iv. 3.
[pp] 2 Cor. i. 12. [q] 2 Cor. v. 1. [r] 1 John iii. 19—21.

what purpose is it to say to your fellow-creatures, "Ye cannot accuse me," when you are constrained to confess before God, "Thou knowest that I am wicked?" Reflect on the strictness of the trial that awaits you; and know, that God will bring every secret thing into judgment, whether it be good or evil[s].]

2. To those who think themselves in a good state—

[It is by no means uncommon for men to "deceive themselves, by thinking themselves something when they are nothing[t]." The way to prevent this is, to take the word of God as the standard by which we try ourselves; and, to beg of God to search and try us. This is recommended by St. Paul, in order that we may have rejoicing in ourselves alone, and not merely in the good opinion of others[u]. If indeed we have in ourselves an evidence that we truly love and fear God, we may say, with Peter, "Lord, thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee[x]." But, after all, we should remember, that, whatever be our estimate of our own character, "Not he who commendeth himself shall be approved, but he whom the Lord commendeth[y]."]

[s] 1 Cor. iv. 4, 5. with the first clause of Job x. 15. [t] Gal. vi. 3.
[u] ib. ver. 4, 5. [x] John xxi. 17. [y] 2 Cor. x. 18.

CCCXIII.

THE INCOMPREHENSIBILITY OF GOD.

Job xi. 7—12. *Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know? The measure thereof is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea. If he cut off, and shut up, or gather together, then who can hinder him? For he knoweth vain men: he seeth wickedness also: will he not then consider it? For vain man would be wise, though man be born like a wild ass's colt.**

WE

* Perhaps it might be better to take only ver. 7 & 8 for the text, and to leave out the second head of this Discourse. In that case, *the subject* will be 'The Incomprehensibility of God;' and *the* great *divisions* of it will be those which are found in the first head in this Skeleton. Then the IMPROVEMENT of the subject might be, to LEARN, 1st, To receive with meekness whatever God has revealed: (and there v. 12 might be introduced:) 2dly, To bear with patience whatever he may inflict: (where *the inefficacy*, v. 11. and *the danger*, v. 12. of contending with God are stated:) and 3dly, To be thankful especially

WE are not a little grieved to see a good man, under circumstances that should have called forth nothing but tenderness and compassion, run down and persecuted by his own friends, and those friends men of great intelligence and real piety. But human nature, notwithstanding it may have been renovated by Divine grace, is still imperfect: and, if left under the influence of any mistaken principle, we may pursue evil with earnestness under the semblance of good, and may provoke God to anger, whilst we imagine that we are rendering him the most acceptable service. The friends of Job were eminently enlightened men: yet all in succession act towards him the part of enemies; and each in succession, with increasing acrimony, condemns him as a hypocrite before God. How painful is it to hear this address of Zophar; "Should thy *lies* make men hold their peace? and when thou *mockest*, shall no man make thee afraid[a]?" But, whilst we lament the sad misapplication of their arguments to the point in hand, and the bitterness of spirit with which they were urged, we must still avail ourselves of the instruction they afford us, which in some respects is equal to any that is contained in the sacred volume.

Zophar supposed, that Job had complained of God as acting unjustly towards him: and, if he had been right in his interpretation of Job's expressions, the reproof he administered would have been just and salutary. His error in relation to Job's real character divests his observations of all force in reference to him: but they deserve the strictest attention in reference to ourselves. From them we are naturally led to notice,

I. The

especially for the discovery he has given of himself in the person of his dear Son. Here it might be shewn, that God, though still incomprehensible, has given the fullest discoveries of himself. Christ is expressly called "the image of the invisible God;" and "Whosoever has seen him, has seen the Father." In his cross, all the perfections of the Father are illustrated and glorified (Ps. lxxxv. 10.); and by the help of his Spirit (2 Cor. iv. 6.) we may discover them.

[a] ver. 3.

I. The incomprehensibility of God—

Well does David say, "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; and his greatness is unsearchable[b]." Truly he is unsearchable,

1. In the perfections of his nature—

[Men will often talk of God, and lay down laws for him, just as if they had the most perfect knowledge of him, and of every thing relating to him. But our knowledge of God is altogether *negative:* we know that he is *not* unwise, *not* unholy, *not* unjust; but, as to any *definite* ideas of his attributes, we have them not. What notion have we of his natural perfections of eternity or immensity? None at all. So of his moral perfections, of justice, mercy, goodness, truth, we, in fact, know as little. We contemplate these qualities as existing in man, and are enabled to estimate with some precision their proper bearings: but, when we come to transfer these qualities to the Deity, we are much in the dark: and we are guilty of great presumption, when we prescribe rules for him, and bind him by laws that are suited for the restriction of human actions. "He dwells in the light which no man can approach unto:" and presumptuously to ascend the mount of his habitation, or to look within the ark, is death[c].]

2. In the dispensations of his providence—

[These we see; but no one of them do we understand[d]. Who will pretend to account for God's conduct towards our first parents, in suffering them to be overcome by temptation, and to entail sin and misery on all their posterity? Who will undertake to declare all the consequences that may arise from any one event, however trivial, or all the motives which exist in the Divine mind for the permission of it? We are apt to speak of things as great and small, because of the degree of importance that we attach to them: but there is nothing great, nothing small, in the estimation of God: and whoever meditates on the history of Joseph, or the facts recorded in the book of Esther, will see, that the most casual and trifling circumstances, as they appear to us, were as important links in the chain of Providence, as those which bear the clearer marks of counsel and design. The rejection of the Jews, the calling of the Gentiles, and the restoration of the Jews to the favour of their God, are events of vast magnitude in human estimation: but what the Apostle says in reference to them, is in reality as applicable to the events of daily occurrence, "Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge

[b] Ps. cxlv. 3. [c] Exod. xix. 12, 13. 1 Sam. vi. 19.

[d] This was as strongly affirmed by Job himself as by his friends. Compare ch. v. 9. & ix. 10. with the text.

knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out[e]!"

3. In the operations of his grace—

[Let that first act of grace be surveyed, the destination of God's only dear Son to be the surety and the substitute of man: let the whole covenant of grace be contemplated: let every act of grace from the foundation of the world to this present moment be scrutinized: and what shall we know of it all? Let it be inquired, why God puts a difference between one nation and another, and between one individual and another: let the mode in which Divine grace operates upon the soul be investigated, so as to distinguish in all things the agency of the Holy Spirit from the actings of our own minds: Who is sufficient for these things? Who is not a child and a fool in his own estimation, when he turns his attention to them? We would address our text to every child of man; "Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty to perfection? It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know? the measure thereof is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea. "Touching the Almighty, we cannot find him out[ee]." "As no man knoweth the things of a man, but the spirit of man which is in him; so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God[f]."]

If God be so incomprehensible, then we may see,

II. The folly of presuming to sit in judgment upon him—

This was the particular drift of Zophar's admonition. He conceived that Job had complained of God as unjust towards him: and therefore, having solemnly warned Job, that "God had exacted less of him than his iniquities deserved," he proceeded to dilate upon the character and ways of God as far exceeding all human comprehension, and to shew unto Job the folly of arraigning the conduct of the Most High. In prosecution of his argument, Zophar shews,

1. How incompetent we are to resist his will—

[God is almighty: and, if he is pleased "to cut off" a man's family, "or to shut him up" in darkness and distress, "or to gather together" his adversaries against him, "what power has any man to hinder him?" We may dispute against him; but we cannot divert him from his purpose: we may complain and murmur; but "we cannot stay his hand." "He doeth according to his

[e] Rom. xi. 33. [ee] Job xxxvii. 23. [f] 1 Cor. ii. 11.

his will in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth:" and, "whatever his counsel may be, that shall stand." What folly then is it to be indulging hard thoughts of him, and to be maintaining a stoutness of heart against him, when we know beforehand that we can never prevail, that we only kick against the pricks, and that the only way of averting his wrath is, to humble ourselves before him! Think, all ye who now repine, "Will your hands be strong in the day that he shall deal with you? or will you thunder with a voice like his?]

2. How unable we are to escape his judgment—

[God sees all the rebellious motions of our hearts, and will certainly call us into judgment for them. Here then is a strong additional reason for not presuming to condemn him. To know that the indulgence of such a rebellious spirit will not avert his displeasure, were quite sufficient to suppress all risings of heart against him: but to know that it greatly augments his displeasure; to know that he marks every rebellious thought that springs up in our minds, and "that he *considers it*" with a view to a just and awful retribution; surely this should make us extremely cautious how we thus insure and aggravate our eternal condemnation. On this subject we shall do well to remember the warning which God himself gave to Job; "He that reproveth God, let him answer it[g]."]

3. How destitute we are of every thing that can qualify us for such an office—

[What is man, "vain man, that would be wise?" What? "He is born" as stupid, as unteachable, and as refractory "as a wild ass's colt[h]." Were he of the first order of created Intelligences, he could know nothing of God any farther than God was pleased to reveal himself to him: but he is a being of an inferior order, and *that* too in a fallen and degraded state; "having the eyes of his understanding darkened" by sin, and "blinded by the god of this world;" yea more, having also a thick impenetrable "veil over his heart." What then can *such* a creature pretend to know of God, that he should presume to sit in judgment upon *him*, and to arraign *his* conduct? We know how incompetent a little child would be to comprehend and sit in judgment upon the designs of a great statesman; yet is there no distance between those, in comparison of that which exists between God and us. Let us bear in mind then what we ourselves are; and that will most effectually repress our arrogance, if we be tempted to judge of God.]

As the obvious IMPROVEMENT of this subject, let us learn,

To

[g] Ch. xl. 2. [h] See Jer. ii. 23, 24.

1. To receive with meekness whatever God has revealed—

[We are no more to sit in judgment upon God's word than upon his providence: if once it be ascertained that the word is a revelation from God, then are we to receive it with the simplicity of a little child. We must indeed use all possible means to attain a clear knowledge of the meaning of the Scripture, as well as to assure ourselves that it is of Divine origin: but we must not wrest the word, and put an unnatural construction upon it, because we do not fully comprehend it: we must rather look up to God for the teachings of his Spirit, and wait upon him till he shall be pleased to "open our understandings to understand the Scriptures." Did we act thus, setting ourselves against no truth that God has revealed, but receiving with humility whatever he has spoken, we should no longer behold the Church rent into parties, and the minds of men embittered against each other by controversies. Let us remember, that "the riches of Christ are unsearchable;" that "his love passeth knowledge;" and that however deep our knowledge of Scripture may be, there will always remain some things difficult to be understood: and our wisdom is, first, to improve for our benefit all that is clear; and then, in reference to the rest, to say, "What I know not now, I shall know hereafter."]

2. To bear with patience whatever God has inflicted—

[Impatience does, in fact, reflect upon God either as unjust or unkind. But if we considered how "little a portion is heard of him," that "his footsteps are not known," and that those things which we deplore as calamities are sent by him in love for our eternal good, we should not only submit with patience to whatever he might lay upon us, but should adore him for it as an expression of his love. The issue of Job's trials is proposed to us in this very view, as the means of composing our minds, and of reconciling us to the most afflictive providences[1]. If Job were now to live on earth again, and were to see all the benefit that has resulted both to himself and to the Church, and all the glory that has redounded to his God from the troubles that he endured, how differently would he speak of them, from what he did when under their immediate pressure! What he has seen of God's unerring wisdom and unbounded love would make him justify God, yea and glorify him too, for all those trials which once he felt so insupportable: and, if we now by faith learn to estimate the Divine character aright, we shall welcome every dispensation however afflictive, and glory in our present troubles, under the sweet assurance, that "our light shall ere long rise in obscurity, and our darkness be as the noon-day."]

[1] Jam. v. 11.

CCCXIV.

THE FOLLY OF TRUSTING IN VANITY.

Job xv. 31. *Let not him that is deceived, trust in vanity; for vanity shall be his recompence.*

THE friends of Job were enlightened and pious men; but they altogether mistook the character of Job, and misinterpreted the dispensations of God towards him. They had assumed a principle which they carried too far: they laid it down as an invariable rule, that hypocrites would be visited with some peculiar judgments, and that extraordinary afflictions were in themselves a proof of some extraordinary wickedness which had procured them. But though they were mistaken in this, their observations are frequently most weighty and important. The words in our text are a kind of general truth, founded upon what Eliphaz had spoken in reference to Job. As applied to Job, it was not by any means pertinent: but as an abstract truth, it is deserving of our deepest attention. Let us consider,

I. The caution—

Men are universally "deceived" through the influence of a corrupt heart, a tempting world, and a subtle adversary. And that deception shews itself, as in other things, so particularly in the "trust" which they place in "lying vanities." They trust,

1. In vain conceits—

[Men conceive themselves to be possessed of wisdom, goodness, strength, in such a degree at least as to warrant their expectation of happiness in a future world. Tell them from God, that they are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked, and they will deny your positions as false, and ridicule them as enthusiastic. They have no idea that they need the influences of the Holy Ghost to enlighten their minds, or the blood of Christ to atone for their sins, or the grace of Christ to renovate their hearts.

But let them examine their boasted attainments, and see whether they amount to any thing more than "vanity." Let them see whether their wisdom has made them like-minded with God; let them bring their goodness to the touchstone of God's law: let them try their strength in any act of spiritual obedience: let them

them see if they can love God with all their heart and mind and soul and strength: and they must soon be convinced, that they are trusting to a mere vanity.]

2. In vain possessions—

[If a man possess much of this world's goods, he presently trusts in it for happiness[a]: "his wealth is his strong city[b];" and he says to gold, "Thou art my confidence[c]."

But is not wealth also vanity? What can it do to assuage our anguish? or what stability is there in the possession of it? Do not "riches often make themselves wings, and fly away?" Or, when we are saying, "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry;" may not God reply, "Thou fool! this night shall thy soul be required of thee"?

Let it not be said, that men do not *trust* in riches; for the reverse is manifest beyond the possibility of contradiction, seeing that the acquisition of wealth is regarded as the chief step towards happiness; and men bestow tenfold more pains in the attainment of it, than they do in the pursuit of heaven.]

3. In vain hopes—

[Every one hopes that he shall be happy when he dies. But, if we "ask men a reason of the hope that is in them," they can make no reply that will at all justify their expectations. They will say, that they live as well as others, and that God is too merciful to condemn them: but as for any Scriptural reason, they can assign none.

What a vanity then is this! If a man were hoping for a harvest while he neglected to use the proper means to obtain one, would not his folly be manifest to all? Wherefore then will men dream of going to heaven when they die, not only without having one word in all the inspired volume to warrant such a hope, but in direct opposition to the plainest declarations of God concerning them? Is not this a strange infatuation, a fatal delusion?]

4. In vain purposes—

[There is no one so hardened, but he intends at some future period to repent. All who have ever reflected on the value of their souls, or the importance of eternity, must have purposed in their minds that they would prepare to meet their God. But in this state they continue without carrying their purposes into execution. The young confess the necessity of repentance, and declare their intention to seek it: but they arrive at manhood, and repentance is unattained: they proceed to a more advanced period of life, and even to old age, and it still is as far from them

3S

[a] 1 Tim. vi. 17. [b] Prov. x. 15. [c] Job xxxi. 24.

as ever. Thus they live, always purposing, but never accomplishing their purpose, till the time for working is for ever past.

Can there be a greater vanity than this? And does not the trusting in such a vanity prove a man deceived?]

That we may not ourselves be guilty of this folly, let us consider,

II. The reason with which the caution is enforced—

God has wisely ordained that men should reap according to what they sow[d]. And it will surely be found, sooner or later, that "they who trust in vanity, shall have vanity for their recompence:" they shall reap,

1. Disappointment—

[God alone is the proper object of our trust and confidence, because he alone can support us, and make us happy. If we have looked to sin for happiness, we will venture to ask, with the Apostle, "What fruit have we now of those things whereof we are ashamed?" If we have sought happiness in things lawful, still we must confess, that the creature, however excellent in itself, is but a broken cistern that can hold no water, and that must consequently fail us when we most need its support. We may fitly compare those who expect solid satisfaction in the creature, to a man almost famished, who dreams that he is eating and drinking, but awakes afterwards as empty and unsatisfied as before[e]. Truly, "he fills his belly with the east-wind[f]:" and his fairest prospects shall "be as the unripe grape shaken off from the vine, or the blossom cast off from the olive[g]."]

2. Vexation—

[Solomon has observed respecting all the choicest things under the sun, that they are "vanity and vexation of spirit:" and the experience of all attests the truth of his observation. The more we trust in the creature, the more pain, generally speaking, it will occasion us: it will not only be a broken staff that refuses to support us, but a sharp "reed that will pierce through the hand that leans upon it[h]." When Ahaz relied upon the Assyrian monarch to extricate him from his troubles, he found nothing but additional vexation: "Tiglath-pilneser distressed him, but helped him not[i]." Thus it will be with all who trust in vanities of any kind, or seek for happiness in any thing but God. They may not yet have reached the crisis of their fate; but vanity and vexation

[d] Gal. vi. 7, 8. Prov. iv. 8. [e] Isai. xxix. 8. [f] ver. 2.
[g] ver. 33. [h] 2 Kin. xviii. 21.
[i] 2 Chron. xxviii. 16, 20.

vexation are inseparable, both in this world and in the world to come. They may think that they have a feast to come; but while dreaming of something pleasing to their palate, they will find that they are "feeding on ashes, and a deceived heart hath turned them aside[k]."]

3. Ruin—

[We well know how the tasting of the forbidden fruit, which promised such gratification and benefit to our first parents, terminated, and what misery it brought on them and their posterity: and the same recompence awaits us also, if we trust in lying vanities, instead of depending wholly on our God. Hear what God himself says respecting this: "Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and that maketh flesh his arm, and whose hope departeth from the Lord[l]." How should we tremble at such a denunciation as this! O let it have a becoming influence on our minds; and stimulate us to seek our happiness where alone it can be found.]

We conclude with OBSERVING,

1. How necessary is it to mark the state and habit of our minds!

[If it were said that gross sin should issue in misery, we should not be surprised: but we are told that the mere "*trusting* in vanity," independent of any gross sins which may flow from it, "will have vanity for its recompence." Let us look then not to our actions only, but to the state and habit of our minds; since our happiness both in time and in eternity depends no less on the latter than on the former. Let us not be satisfied that we are free from any flagrant transgressions, while we are relying on any thing besides God. Let us observe whether we practically feel the emptiness of all created things, and their utter insufficiency to make us happy either here or hereafter. And let us be going forth to God in the constant exercise of prayer, and "commit our souls to him in well-doing, as into the hands of a faithful Creator."]

2. How thankful should we be, that there is an all-sufficient friend in whom we may trust!

[God in Christ is the only legitimate object of our hope and confidence. We are told, under the figure of Eliakim, that "Christ has the key of David; that he openeth and no man shutteth, and shutteth and no man openeth; and that on him must hang all the glory of his Father's house[m]." "Every vessel in the Lord's house, whether great or small, must hang on him;" and every care must be devolved on him. In him there is a fulness of all that

[k] Isai. xliv. 20. See also Eccles. 16, 17.
[l] Jer. xvii. 5. [m] Isai. xxii. 20—24.

that we can want. In him is wisdom for the blind, righteousness for the guilty, sanctification for the polluted, and redemption for the enslaved: and all this he will become to those who trust in him[n]." Be thankful then, Brethren, for such a friend, and for the command given you by God, "Trust in him at all times, ye people." Rejoice that he can bear your every burthen, and supply your every want; and that, as a trust in vanity will have vanity for its recompence, so a "confidence in Jesus will have a great, substantial, everlasting recompence of reward[o]."]

[n] 1 Cor. 1. 30. [o] Heb. x. 35.

CCCXV.

DARK DISPENSATIONS OVERRULED FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE SAINTS.

Job xvii. 9. *The righteous also shall hold on his way; and he that hath clean hands shall be stronger and stronger.*

AMONGST all the doctrines of our holy religion, there is not one more difficult to be received than that which here offers itself to our notice: it may well be numbered amongst "the deep things of God." The manner too in which it has been professed by men of enthusiastic minds, or antinomian habits, has rendered it odious in the eyes of thousands, who yet are truly upright before God. But neither the difficulty of guarding it from abuse, nor the averseness of men to embrace it, must deter us from stating what we believe to be the truth of God. We would not needlessly go out of our way to introduce a subject of such difficult discussion; nor, on the other hand, should we feel justified in passing it by when it comes fairly before us: we are bound "to declare unto you," as far as we are able, "*the whole* counsel of God." The doctrine we allude to is that which is generally called, The perseverance of the saints: and it is evidently contained in the words of our text. Job seeing how all his friends were puzzled and confounded by the mysterious dispensation under which he was suffering, consoled himself with the thought, that, when the issue of it should be seen, it should greatly promote the edification of all who were

were truly upright: persons who were unsound or hypocritical might be discouraged by it; but "the upright and innocent" would rescue it from abuse; and would take occasion from it to pursue their course with augmented steadiness and zeal.

Agreeably to this view of our text, we will proceed to state,

I. The general principles upon which the perseverance of the saints is founded—

It is supposed by many, that there is in the souls of the Regenerate a principle which is in its own nature imperishable and indestructible: and in support of this opinion, they appeal to several passages of Scripture which seem to establish this fact. They say, that "we are born of incorruptible seed[a];" that, "because this seed remaineth in us, we cannot sin[b]; and that it must of necessity "spring up unto everlasting life[c]." But we are by no means satisfied with this statement: we doubt much whether there be in the universe a man, provided he possess one grain of humility, who will venture to affirm, that he has such an *indestructible* principle of grace within him: nor do we think that the passages here cited do by any means establish such a notion: the seed to which such efficacy is ascribed, is, not *a principle*, but "*the word of God*[d]:" and it is *the tendency*, rather than *the certain infallible effect*, of the Spirit's operations, that our Lord speaks of, when he compares his Spirit to "a well of water springing up into everlasting life." Nevertheless we think that there is in the holy Scripture sufficient foundation for the doctrine we are considering. It may be proved,

1. From the immutability of God—

[It is "from God that every good and perfect gift proceeds[e];" even from Him "with whom is no variableness nor shadow of turning[f]" ——— These gifts are the result of his own

[a] 1 Pet. i. 23. [b] 1 John iii. 9. [c] John iv. 14.

[d] If we compare 1 Pet. i. 23. with the latter part of 1 John ii. 14. they will give the true explanation of that difficult passage, 1 John iii. 9. They will shew, that *the seed* is not *a principle*, but *the word*.

[e] Phil. ii. 13. [f] Jam. i. 17.

own eternal purpose and grace[g]: and they are bestowed by him with a fixed purpose to render them effectual for the salvation of our souls[h]. Hence they are said to be "without repentance[i]," or change of mind in him who bestows them. There is an inseparable connexion between the original purpose formed in the Divine mind, and the final completion of it in the salvation of the person thus chosen[k]: and to this very immutability in the Divine mind is the salvation of men expressly ascribed[l]." The foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his[m]."]

2. From the covenant of grace—

[In the covenant which God from all eternity entered into with his dear Son[n], there were a number given to Christ, to be his purchased possession[o]. In behalf of these the Saviour stipulated, not only to redeem them by his blood, but also to keep them by his grace[p]: and the Father also engaged, not only never to depart from them, but to secure them from ever finally departing from him[q]. Provision was made for them, that they should have "every thing that pertained to life and godliness:" and the promises which assured these things to them, were made irrevocable[r]; that so their consolation might be made abundant[s], and their salvation sure[t]. On this covenant the Christian lays hold[u]; and in an assured dependence on it he may say, "I am confident of this very thing, that He who hath begun a good work in me will perform it until the day of Christ[x];" and that nothing shall ever separate me from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord[y]." In this covenant David felt his security[z]; and in this may every Believer trust, with humble, but unshaken, confidence[a].]

3. From the intercession of Christ—

[Whence was it that, when Peter and Judas resembled each other so much in their crimes, they differed so widely in their end; the one being restored to his apostleship, and the other being left to go to his own place? Our Lord himself tells us: "Peter, I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not[b]." And to the same cause must be traced the restoration of all who are restored, and the stability of all who stand. St. Paul, in defying all his enemies, lays the chief stress on this: he mentions with gratitude a *dying* Saviour; but glories more especially in the thought of Christ as *risen*, and as *making continual intercession* for

[g] 2 Tim. i. 9. [h] 2 Thess. ii. 13. [i] Rom. xi. 29.
[k] Rom. viii. 29, 30. [l] Mal. iii. 9. [m] 2 Tim. ii. 19.
[n] Tit. i. 2. [o] John xvii. 6. [p] ib. ver. 12.
[q] Jer. xxxii. 40. [r] 2 Cor. i. 20. [s] Heb. vi. 17, 18.
[t] Rom. iv. 16. [u] Isai. lvi. 4, 6. [x] Phil. i. 6.
[y] Rom. viii. 35—39. [z] 2 Sam. xxiii. 5.
[a] 2 Tim. i. 12. & iv. 8, 18. [b] Luke xxii. 32.

for the saints[c]. *Him* the Father heareth always: and, whilst *he* "appeareth in the presence of God for us," "bearing our names on his breast-plate," and "making intercession for us according to the will of God," we need not fear but that we shall in due time occupy "the mansions which he has prepared for us."]

On these grounds we believe that the saints' perseverance in faith and holiness is secured.

II. The particular manner in which the most untoward circumstances shall be overruled to promote it—

This is the particular point to which our attention should be directed, in order to elucidate the true import of the text: for, in the text we have an assurance, not merely that the saints shall persevere, but that they shall persevere under circumstances which will prove a stumbling-block unto all whose hearts are not truly upright before God.

There are many circumstances which prove stumbling-blocks to the unsound—

[Amongst these we must first notice those which Job himself more especially refers to. Though he was perfect and upright in himself, he was oppressed with a heavier load of afflictions than ever fell to the lot of mortal man; and in the midst of them, appeared to be forsaken of his God. Now from such a dispensation, a man whose heart was not right with God would be ready to conclude, that it was in vain to serve God; and that, if he is to be subjected to such trials as these, it were better at once to seek the happiness which the world affords; since God puts no difference between the righteous and the wicked.

But more especially, if there be heavy trials for righteousness sake, the unsound professor is alarmed; and he draws back from an open confession of Christ, lest he should be involved in troubles which he is not willing to endure[d].

But the greatest obstacle in the way of the unsound arises from the falls of those who make a profession of religion. A man whose principles are not fixed, is ready to doubt whether there be any truth in the Gospel itself, when he sees a Judas and a Demas making shipwreck of their faith. Our blessed Lord told us, not only that such circumstances would arise, but they would produce the most unhappy effects: "Woe unto the world

[c] Rom. viii. 34. with Rom. v. 10. & Heb. vii. 25.
[d] John x. 22. [e] Phil. i. 12—14.

world because of offences; for it must needs be that offences come."]

But all these tend ultimately to the establishment of those who are truly upright—

[The assurance that trouble springs not out of the dust, composes their minds under the diversified trials of life: they know, that, whoever be the instrument, it is God who uses it; and that He doeth all things well.]

If persecution rage, he has counted the cost, and is "ready to suffer the loss of all things" for Christ's sake; yea, "he rejoices, if he is counted worthy to suffer for his Redeemer's sake." The imprisonment of Paul was designed to intimidate his followers, and to obstruct the progress of the Gospel: but "it turned out rather to the furtherance of the Gospel," inasmuch as multitudes were encouraged by his example to preach the truth with greater firmness and zeal[c].

So also, if there be any public disgrace brought on the Gospel by the misconduct of those who have been regarded as eminent in the Church, the truly upright Christian is not at all shaken in his faith: he knows that the Gospel is wholly independent of those who profess it: if eleven of the Apostles had proved like Judas, he would not therefore have concluded that there was either less importance, or less efficacy, in the Gospel of Christ. He considers religion as standing on its own proper grounds; and he determines, through grace, to adhere to Christ, though all others should forsake him.

Here it may be well to mark more distinctly the operation of such circumstances on the true Believer's mind.

Events like these *humble him before God:* they shew him how weak he himself is, and how certainly he also shall fall and perish, if for one moment he be forsaken of his God. They *make him also more earnest in prayer to God.* Seeing whence alone his strength must come, he cries day and night, "Hold thou up my goings in thy ways, that my footsteps slip not. Moreover, he takes occasion from them to *search and try more carefully his own heart,* lest he also should have deceived his own soul. He *is put also on his guard against temptations,* and is *made to watch more carefully against every occasion of sin.* Finally, he is *made to feel the necessity of living more simply and entirely by faith* in the Son of God, and of receiving out of his fulness those supplies of grace and strength, whereby alone he can hope to get the victory.

Thus are those very events, which weaken the hands, discourage the hearts, and subvert the faith of hypocrites, overruled for the advancement and establishment of the righteous in every good word and work.]

To

To GUARD against an abuse of this doctrine, we intreat you to bear in mind,

1. The characters who alone can take comfort in it—

[It is "the righteous" only, and he that "hath clean hands," that has any title to the promise before us, or that is in a fit state to derive any consolation from it. If any be walking in the habitual indulgence of either open or secret sin, he is a hypocrite before God; and to be left to "hold on *his* way," will be the heaviest curse that can be inflicted on him. Know, all of you, that "herein the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil; he that doeth not righteousness is not of God[f]."]

2. The way in which alone it should be improved—

[It is not to create in any one an unhallowed confidence, and to make him imagine that he may relax his exertions; but rather to encourage his exertions, from the assurance that they shall not be in vain[g]. Whatever confidence we may feel, it must always be blended with holy fear[h]. If the Apostle "kept under his body, lest after having preached to others he himself should become a cast-away," who amongst us will feel himself at liberty to remit his caution, or relax his diligence, in the ways of God? "The path of the just is as the shining light which shineth more and more unto the perfect day:" and whilst we have an evidence that our path accords with that description, we shall be in no danger of deceiving ourselves: but the very moment that our progress is doubtful, we have reason to inquire whether we are indeed upright before God. Use then this doctrine, not as an excuse for idleness, but as an incentive to diligence; that you may "not lose the things which you have wrought, but may receive a full reward."]

[f] 1 John iii. 10. [g] 1 Cor. xv. 58. [h] Prov. xxviii. 14.

CCCXVI.

CONDUCT OF SINNERS TOWARDS GOD.

Job xxi. 14, 15. *Therefore they say unto God, Depart from us; for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways. What is the Almighty, that we should serve him? and what profit should we have, if we pray unto him?*

AS in the speeches of Job's different friends, so in his answers to them, we must ever bear in mind the ground of their controversy. This, as we have often before mentioned, was, A persuasion on their part that God

God in his providence would mark the characters of men by his dealings towards them; and that signal judgments of any kind were sufficient, without any other evidence whatever, to prove the pre-eminent wickedness of the person on whom they were inflicted. The different speakers indeed all wander occasionally from the point, and launch out into other topics; but all intended to keep this point in view, and to make it the ultimate object of their discourse. The friends of Job had maintained their side of the question with great confidence, and had driven him more immediately to vindicate himself in opposition to the implied charge contained in their arguments; but here he speaks less of himself, and directs his answer more clearly to the general question. He shews that multitudes of those who prospered in the world were altogether addicted to impiety; yea, that their very prosperity was made by them an occasion of more determined hostility to God[a]: and yet God continued to prosper them both in life and in death, so far, at least, as to exempt them from any remarkable judgments either in the one or the other. The impiety of these persons, as described in our text, must not be interpreted literally, as if the words here used were uttered with their lips: they must be understood as marking rather the language only of their *hearts* and *lives*; and in this view they will be found to designate with equal truth the dispositions and habits of ungodly men in all ages.

In evincing this, we shall,

I. Confirm the assertion in our text—

The assertion itself is most humiliating, seeing that it lays to the charge of unconverted men these two enormous crimes; first, that they cast off all regard for God; and next, that they vindicate this conduct as reasonable and proper. Now that this is but too just a description of unregenerate men, we appeal,

1. To observation—

[What is the conduct of the generality, when the light of Divine

[a] "*Therefore.*"

Divine truth is set before them? Do they not shut their eyes against it? Even the public exhibition of it they do not like: but if a pious Minister or friend speak personally to them in secret, they rather resent it as an insult, than accept it with gratitude; and by the aversion to holy things which they manifest, they, in effect, "say to God, Depart from us; we desire not the knowledge of thy ways"———If an attention to heavenly things be urged from a regard to duty and interest, the generality will deny that a life of godliness is *either necessary or profitable*. They conceive, that their time and talents are altogether their own, to be employed according to their own will and pleasure: and that all serious piety, and a life of communion with God, are sources rather of pain and melancholy than of peace and happiness———]

2. To experience—

[What does every man's own heart declare? Let us all look back and see, What has been *our* conduct in relation to this matter? Have we desired the knowledge of *God*'s ways, as we have of the ways that lead to worldly honour and interest? Have we not, on the contrary, when God, by his providence, his word, his Spirit, has been knocking at the door of our hearts, said to him, Depart from me; I have other occupations and interests to attend to; Thou must wait for a more convenient season? If pressed by the exhortations of a faithful friend or Minister, have we not vindicated ourselves as acting a wise and rational part; and asserted, (by our conduct at least,) that such a devotedness to God as was required of us was neither necessary nor desirable? Yes verily, we all have "hated the light[b]," have wished it to be withheld from us[c], have "rebelled against it," when it has flashed conviction on our consciences[d], and have determined to go on our own way, in spite of all God's warnings and invitations[e]. By this resistance to God we have in fact denied his authority over us[f], avowed ourselves his decided enemies[g], and lived without him in the world[h]———]

Let us now proceed,

II. To suggest some reflections naturally arising from it—

1. How marvellous is the patience and long-suffering of God!

[The conduct above described is not peculiar to men of an abandoned character; it is found in every child of man. There

[b] John iii. 19, 20. [c] Isai. xxx. 10, 11. [d] Job xxiv. 13.
[e] Jer. vi. 16, 17. & xliv. 15—17.
[f] Exod. v. 2. Ps. xii. 4. Jer. ii. 31. [g] Rom. viii. 7.
[h] Eph. ii. 12.

There are indeed some persons *comparatively* religious. Of these it may be said, that they affect religion, and even glory in the distinction which they assume to themselves as persons fearing God and working righteousness. But, in truth, there are no people more decidedly hostile to the Gospel than those whom we now refer to. No man was ever more zealous for a certain kind of religion than Paul in his unconverted state; yet no man was ever a more bitter persecutor of the Church than he? And it is a fact, that, when the Jews at Antioch wished to expel Paul and Barnabas from their city, they could find no persons that would enter more cordially into their views, or more vigorously execute their designs, than "the devout women, whom they stirred up" to countenance and aid their proceedings[1]. "God's ways," whether *of acceptance* with him, or *of obedience* to him, are displeasing and irksome to the natural man; the one being too humiliating for him, and the other too strict and self-denying: and the contempt that is universally poured on those who "walk as Christ walked," is itself the most unequivocal proof of the universality of our departure from God, and our hatred of his ways. How astonishing then is it, that God should bear with us a single hour! that he does not now retaliate upon us, as he will do at the day of judgment, and say, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels!" Let us then "account the long-suffering of God to be salvation;" and "let his goodness and patience and forbearance lead us to repentance."]

2. What glorious tidings does the Gospel bring to our ears!

[It was for such persons that the Lord Jesus Christ came into the world, and offered himself a sacrifice to the offended Majesty of heaven: "Whilst we were enemies, Christ died for us." To such persons also are we sent, to offer them a free and full salvation: the extent or long-continuance of their rebellion is no bar to the exercise of Divine mercy towards them: "Whosoever cometh unto me," says our Lord, "I will in no wise cast him out." O ye who are convinced of your past iniquities, and are sensible of your need of mercy, hear what St. Paul affirms; "It is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, even the chief." Do not imagine that God is filled with resentment against you, as your earthly parents would have been, if you had so treated them: he is plenteous in mercy; and, if you will go to him, he will "give you his blessing liberally, without upbraiding." If it be thought, that justice will require the execution of vengeance on such sinners as we; be it known, that his justice is satisfied by the atonement which Christ has offered; and

[1] Acts xiii. 50.

and that he can now be "just, and yet the justifier of all them that believe."]

3. What a blessed change takes place in the great work of conversion!

[The inmost dispositions of the soul are changed by grace; so that he who lately said unto God, "Depart from me," now desires his presence above all things, and pants after God as the hart after the water-brooks, and considers his loving-kindness as better than life itself." Now he "counts all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus his Lord." Nor is it the principles only of the Gospel that he loves, but the precepts also; and the way of God's commandments is as much approved as the way of salvation through a crucified Redeemer. Now he feels that "he is not his own, but, having been bought with a price, is bound to glorify God with his body and his spirit which are God's." Nor is it any longer a question with him, whether there is any profit in communion with God: he knows and feels that there is no employment under heaven so profitable; and that, in fact, there is no profit in any thing, not even in attending the ordinances or in reading the word of God, unless a blessing be brought down upon the soul by fervent prayer.

Shew ye then, Beloved, the truth of your conversion by the change of your dispositions, your tempers, your habits. If ye be indeed brought forth into marvellous light, "walk as children of the light and of the day." And as some remains of your former corruption will yet be found in you, be daily putting off the old man, and be putting on the new, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.]

CCCXVII.

ACQUAINTANCE WITH GOD.

Job xxii. 21. *Acquaint now thyself with him, and be at peace.*

IN estimating the characters and conduct of men, we must make great allowance for their prejudices and mistakes. Unless we take into our consideration the erroneous idea which Job's friends had conceived respecting the dealings of Providence with men, we shall be ready to view them in a most unfavourable light. Even with this allowance we scarcely know how to account for the extreme uncharitableness of Eliphaz. He is not content with accusing Job of secret

secret sins that could be known to God only, but he brings plain and positive charges against him of open visible crimes, no one of which could with even a shadow of truth be imputed to him. We regret to see such inconsistency in a man, whom yet we are constrained to consider as pious: and we turn from this painful view of him, to notice the excellent advice, which, though still under a mistaken apprehension of Job's character, he gave him. To a person under any circumstances, an acquaintance with God is most desirable, but more especially under such a dark and afflictive dispensation as that which Job at this time experienced. That we may invite you all to seek it, we propose to shew,

I. Wherein an acquaintance with God consists—

[There is a knowledge of God which may be obtained from the works of creation: but this must of necessity be extremely partial and defective. They display his wisdom, and power, and goodness; but they exhibit no traces of that perfection which we so greatly need to be acquainted with, namely, his mercy in pardoning sin. It is from Revelation only that we can learn his true character as "a just God and a Saviour:" and for a discovery of him in that endearing view, we must look at him as exhibited to us in the Gospel of his Son. It is in the face of Jesus Christ that all his glory shines[a]. It is in the cross of Christ that all his perfections are made to unite and harmonize: it is there alone that we can see "mercy and truth met together, and righteousness and peace kissing each other." This then it is which constitutes a true knowledge of God; it is an acquaintance with the great work of redemption; a view of "God in Christ Jesus reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them" — — —]

II. What is that measure of acquaintance with him which we as sinners are privileged to enjoy—

[It is not a mere speculative knowledge of these things, but an actual participation of them in our own souls: it is not "an hearing of God with our ears, but a seeing of him with our eyes," as Job speaks; I mean, with the eye of faith, which is privileged to "behold Him who is invisible[b]." By faith "we have a fellowship," yea a most intimate and endearing fellowship, "with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus Christ." God will come and manifest himself to us, as our God, our Father, and our Friend[c]. "By

[a] 2 Cor. iv. 6. [b] Heb. xi. 27. [c] Gen. v. 24.

"By his Spirit he will enable us to cry, Abba, Father." "He will dwell in us, and walk with us:" Christ will live in us, even as his heavenly Father lived in him; insomuch that "he himself will be our life[d]." What nearer intimacy can be conceived? yet this it is our privilege to enjoy: this union with him, this committing of our souls to him, this receiving all needful communications out of his fulness, this living entirely by faith in him as *our* Saviour and *our* God; this, I say, is that measure of acquaintance with him which we ought to seek, and may actually possess[e]———]

III. The benefits resulting from it—

[Who can ever fully declare what is implied in peace with God? Verily it is "a peace that passeth all understanding"——— But there is peculiar emphasis in the word "Now;" "acquaint *now* thyself with God, and be at peace." What was the estimate which Eliphaz had formed of Job's character? He viewed Job as the vilest hypocrite upon earth, and considered him as punished by God with most signal vengeance: yet he said to him, "Acquaint *now*," now, notwithstanding all thy vileness; now, in the midst of all these judgments; even *now* acquaint thyself with God, and "so shall good come unto thee." This was indeed a just view of God, though an erroneous view of the poor afflicted saint. This is the view we should ever have of God in Christ Jesus: we should see him ready to bestow his richest mercies even on the chief of sinners, and as determined "never to cast out any who come unto him." Be it known then, that, if only we will acquaint ourselves with God as he is revealed to us in the Gospel of his Son, there is not a good which God himself can bestow, which he will not richly communicate to us; nor is there a condition, either of sin or suffering, in which that acquaintance with him shall not be effectual for the restoration of our souls to peace. Were we the vilest of the human race, our iniquities should be blotted out——— and were we in a condition a thousand times more deplorable than that of Job, it should turn all our sorrows into joy[f]———]

ADDRESS—

Acquaint *now* yourselves with God,

1. Ye who are in a state of sin—[Seek him in reading, meditation, prayer, &c.]

2. Ye who are in a state of suffering—[Doubt not his willingness or sufficiency.]

[d] John vi. 56, 57. with Col. iii. 4.
[e] Gal. ii. 20. [f] Cant. ii. 3.

CCCXVIII.

THE UPRIGHT PERSON'S COMFORT UNDER AFFLICTIONS.

Job xxiii. 10. *He knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.*

THE superior happiness of the godly above that of the ungodly is not so manifest in a season of prosperity as under circumstances of deep affliction. The world can rejoice in their portion as long as their pleasures are uninterrupted by bitter reflections or painful dispensations: but in trouble they have no refuge. The righteous, on the contrary, have less of thoughtless gaiety; but in time of trouble they find abundant consolations. No man was ever beset with a greater complication of trials than Job; all of which were beyond measure heightened by the uncharitable censures of his friends: but still he found an inward support by reflecting upon,

I. His conscious integrity—

It is characteristic of God's children, that they are all upright before God—

[As there is a very considerable difference in the attainments of different men with respect to bodily strength and intellectual powers, notwithstanding all possess the same members and enjoy the same faculties, so is there with respect to piety also, notwithstanding all are upright in heart. From the very instant that a person is converted to God, he must of necessity hate sin, and long after a conformity to God's image: he cannot commit sin[a]; he must be, according to the measure of grace given him, "an Israelite indeed, and without *allowed* guile." Nor does humility require us to confess ourselves hypocrites (*wilful* hypocrites, I mean) when God has quickened us by his spirit; for it is not humility, but ingratitude and falsehood, to deny the work which God has wrought in us. Many of God's most eminent saints have spoken of their own integrity and rejoiced in it, and even pleaded it before God[b]. And we also, by "proving every one of us our own work, may have rejoicing in ourselves, and not in another[c].]

A consciousness of their own integrity is a rich source of consolation to them in a trying hour—

[There are times and seasons when almost all the other springs

[a] 1 John iii. 9. [b] Ps. xvii. 2. 2 Kin. xx. 3. [c] Gal. vi. 4.

springs of comfort seem dried up: sometimes it may be painful even to reflect upon God[d]. Job acknowledges in the context, that God's "presence was a trouble to him:" but knowing that God was acquainted with his heart, he could yet *appeal* to him respecting his own integrity: and from this source he derived a pleasing satisfaction, an encouraging hope. St. Paul, under a daily and hourly expectation of martyrdom, experienced much joy in the same thought[e]: nor shall *we* find it a small consolation to us, under any trials we may be called to endure.]

But Job found a yet further consolation in reflecting upon,

II. The expected issue of his trials—

Though he was at present in as hot a furnace as he could possibly endure, yet he believed that he was put into it by a skilful Refiner, for the purifying of his soul from dross—

[They who are truly upright, learn to view the hand of God both in their comforts and their troubles: they know that affliction comes not by chance, but from the hand of Him who directs every thing with consummate wisdom. The ungodly look no further than to second causes; and therefore yield to murmuring and impatience whenever they receive evil from the hand of their fellow-creatures: but the godly are persuaded that their portion, whatever it be, is mixed for them by God himself, and that it is intended "to purge away their iniquity," that they may be partakers of his holiness[f]. This was evidently the view which Job had of troubles, notwithstanding they sprang from such various sources.]

An expectation of the benefit reconciled him to the means used for his good—

[No one can love trouble on its own account; since it is "never joyous, but grievous." But sanctification is the highest wish of the upright soul: it is regarded as a pearl that cannot be purchased at too high a price. Trials, however painful, are welcomed, if they may but be the means of promoting this blessed end. Many have even dreaded the removal of them, lest with them they should lose also the benefits flowing from them. And, if we could have viewed the afflictions of Job in their true light, we should have preferred his condition when upon the dunghill far before that of his censorious friends. He was enabled to look forward to the end; and the event fully justified his expectations.]

ADDRESS—

[d] Ps. lxxvii. 3. [e] 2 Cor. i. 8—12.
[f] Ps. xxxix. 9. Isai. xxvii. 9. Heb. xii. 10.

ADDRESS,

1. Those who are in the furnace of affliction—

[Look above all second causes, and see God appointing the nature, measure, and duration of all your trials[g]. "He brings the third part through the fire;" and appoints tribulation as your way to the kingdom. Let him accomplish his own will in his own way; and "what ye know not now, ye shall know hereafter."]

2. Those who have been delivered from their troubles—

[When you were bowed down under the load of your afflictions, you probably thought how differently you would live if God should hear your prayers, and deliver you. Now then remember the vows that are upon you[h]. Provoke him not to visit you with yet heavier afflictions. As clouds succeed the rain, so do troubles come in succession while we are in this vale of tears. Endeavour then so to improve the past, that future troubles may find you better prepared for their reception, and every dispensation fit you for your eternal rest.]

3. Those who have never yet experienced any particular trials—

[A little outward religion will satisfy you in a state of ease and prosperity. But that will not be found sufficient in a time of trouble. The fire will try what your attainments are. Now therefore be in earnest about the work of salvation, that when affliction comes, it may be mitigated by the consolations of an upright mind, and not be aggravated by the accusations of a guilty conscience.]

[g] 2 Sam. xvi.10. [h] Ps. lxvi.10—15. & cxvi.1—14.

CCCXIX.

SELF-REPROACH.

Job xxvii. 6. *My heart shall not reproach me so long as I live.*

JOB had been represented by God as a perfect and upright man: and the severe trials he was called to endure served only to prove the truth of that assertion. True it is that he was occasionally driven by the unkindness of his friends and the depth of his sufferings to speak without due reverence for the Supreme Being; but never were the predictions of Satan,

Satan, or the accusations of his own friends, verified respecting him. His whole life had been a continued course of piety and virtue: and he determined, through grace, that nothing should divert him from it. Being conscious that he had maintained his integrity hitherto before God, he would not suffer his uncharitable friends to rob him of the comfort which that consciousness afforded him in this hour of trial: "he held fast his righteousness, and would not let it go." And being determined to preserve the same blessed course even to the end, he said, "My heart shall not reproach me so long as I live."

Of all the blessings that man can enjoy in this life, there is none greater than the testimony of a good conscience: without it, not all the world can make us happy; and with it, we find support under all the calamities that can come upon us. Let us then consider,

I. The proper office of conscience—

Whilst we acknowledge that there are no innate ideas which obtain universally amongst the children of men, we affirm that there is in every man an innate capacity to judge of, yea, and an innate power that *will* sit in judgment upon, his actions, and *will* pronounce a sentence of condemnation or acquittal upon him, according as he obeys or violates the law, by which he conceives himself bound to regulate his life. To this effect St. Paul, speaking of the Gentiles, says, that they, not having the written law, are a law unto themselves; and that their conscience accuses or excuses them, according as they demean themselves in reference to that law[a].

From hence we see that the office of conscience is two-fold;

1. To judge of what is past—

[God, who will pass judgment upon all men at the last day, has appointed Conscience to be, as it were, his Vice-gerent in the hearts of men, and to testify to them beforehand what sentence they are to expect at his tribunal: nor is it of actions only

[a] Rom. ii. 15.

only that it is constituted a judge, but of dispositions, of motives, and of all the most secret workings of the heart. If evil be committed by us in act, word, or thought, it is to condemn us, even though the whole world should resound with our praise: and, on the other hand, it is to bear testimony in our favour, and to acquit us, if we are innocent, even though men and devils should combine to load us with reproach. Its office, as an accuser, is strikingly exhibited in those who brought to our Lord the woman taken in adultery: when he bade the person who was without sin amongst them to cast the first stone at her, they all went out successively "from the eldest to the last," every one of them standing condemned in his own mind[b]. We are not necessarily to conclude, that they had all been guilty of the same particular sin; but that every one of them had some grievous sin brought to his remembrance, by which he was convinced that he himself was not a fit person to use severity towards her. Our Lord did not lay any specific sin to their charge; nor were the spectators able to accuse them: but conscience did its office: and they were unable to withstand its potent sway. Many glorious instances also are recorded of the power of conscience to support the mind under the severest trials. The very instance of Job which we are now considering, evinces this: and the solemn appeals which David, and Paul, and others, have made to God himself respecting their integrity, prove, beyond a doubt, that the testimony of a good conscience will enable a man to rejoice, though suffering under the foulest aspersions and the most unfounded accusations[c]———]

2. To direct in what is to come—

[Every man is bound to be regulated by his own conscience. We may sin indeed, and sin grievously, *whilst* following the dictates of our conscience; but our sin will consist, not in doing what we think to be right, but in not taking care to have our conscience better informed. Even supposing any line of conduct to be right in itself, we ought not to do it, unless we believe it to be right: for "whatsoever is not of faith, is sin[d]." We ought to be "thoroughly persuaded in our own minds[e]:" if we doubt respecting the proper line of duty, we should wait, and inquire, and pray, till we see our way clear; especially if the doubt have respect to the *morality* of the action[f]. There may be doubts about some particular circumstances which can never be fully resolved; and in them we must follow the line which expediency prescribes: but where duty can by any means be ascertained, then we should exert ourselves to the uttermost to

[b] John viii. 7—9.

[c] 2 Sam. xxiii. 21—23. 2 Cor. i. 12, 17, 18, 23. See also Acts xxiii. 1. & Rom. ix. 1, 2.

[d] Rom. xiv. 23. [e] ib. ver. 5. [f] ib. ver. 22.

to learn the will of God, and then follow the path which we apprehend that He will most approve.]

But, that we may mark more distinctly the office of conscience in relation to this point, we shall proceed to notice,

II. Our duty with respect to it—

Whilst conscience is given to us to preserve us from all moral evil, we are bound on our part to preserve it in a lively and vigorous state. It is our duty,

1. To consult its records—

[Unobserved by us, it notices from time to time the quality of our actions, and frequently assigns them a very different character from that which a common observer would imagine them to bear. But if we forbear to consult its records, they become gradually fainter, till they are almost wholly effaced. Scarcely an hour, and certainly not a day, should ever pass, without our retiring, as it were, to converse with it. What hast thou recorded concerning me this day? What is thy testimony respecting my morning addresses at the throne of grace? Were they such as became a poor sinful creature, redeemed by the blood of God's only dear Son, and altogether dependent on the operations of his grace? Were they full of gratitude for mercies received, of contrition for sins committed, of earnestness for future communications, and of affiance in him as a promise-keeping God? What hast thou recorded concerning my family devotions? What, of my tempers throughout the day? What, of the improvement of my time for thee? What, of my zeal for thine honour? What, of my labours for the eternal welfare of my fellow-creatures? Thus, as the Apostle says, "We should examine ourselves," and "prove our ownselves:" nay more, we should beg of God to search and try, not our ways only, but our inmost thoughts and desires, that so we may have a fuller knowledge of ourselves, and keep a conscience void of offence both towards God and man.]

2. To venerate its testimony—

[If we disregard its voice, we may soon silence it altogether, yea, we may even "sear it" as with a hot iron, so as to make it "past feeling[g]." We must remember, whose voice it is, even the voice of God himself speaking in our hearts. Were God to speak by an audible voice from heaven, we should hear and tremble: the fear of his Majesty would alarm us. But his Majesty is the same, whether he speak in thunders and in earthquakes,

[g] 1 Tim. iv. 2.

quakes, or in a still small voice: and he should be listened to with the same reverence in the one as in the other. It is his testimony respecting us; and agreeably to that we should estimate both our character and our prospects. "If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our hearts and knoweth all things: but, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence towards God[h]."]

3. To obey its dictates—

[Nothing can justify a violation of its commands. Whatever it prescribes, we should do it without hesitation and without delay. Nothing should intimidate us, nothing deter us. we should not count our lives dear in comparison of its testimony in our favour. Like the Hebrew youths, we should be resolute, though menaced with all the sufferings that tyrannic cruelty can inflict. And here it may be useful to observe, that the first testimony of conscience is generally the most just, and most to be depended on. We may by reasonings bewilder conscience, so that it shall not know what testimony to give; or we may by leaning to the side of our passions or our interests bias it to give a directly contrary testimony to that which it first suggested: it is therefore of peculiar importance to bear in mind our first impressions: for though they may not be always right, and may be corrected by the acquisition of further light and knowledge, yet they may be always considered as more pure and unadulterated, and therefore as deserving of more peculiar attention.]

4. To get it enlightened and rectified—

[This, though mentioned last, must be attended to in the first place. If we navigate the seas with a compass, we must take care that that compass be true to the pole, and not be under any undue influence to impede its motions. If that be drawn aside by a magnet, it will, instead of assisting us in our voyage, infallibly drive us on rocks and quicksands. Thus St. Paul could say, that he had lived "in all good conscience" from his youth up; but, being blinded by his prejudices, and "thinking he *ought* to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus," he was for a long time a most determined enemy of Christ and his Church. Afterwards, when he was enlightened and *renewed* by the Spirit of God, he changed his course, and became as zealous for Christ as ever he had been against him. No pains therefore should be esteemed too great for the acquiring of divine knowledge: we should study the holy Scriptures with all diligence: we should cry mightily to God for the influences of his Spirit to guide us into all truth; and we should keep our minds open to conviction upon all points that will admit of doubt. Especially we should intreat of God to give us a single eye: for, "if our eye be single, our whole body will be full of light; but if our

[h] 1 John iii 20, 21.

our eye be evil, our whole body will be full of darkness: and, *if the light that is in us be darkness, how great is that darkness!*"]

We cannot better improve this subject than by suggesting to you some salutary CAUTIONS. Guard then against,

1. An evil and guilty conscience—

[Many continue all their days impenitent, whilst yet they *know* that they are guilty before God———O let none of you rest satisfied with such a state as this. If sin be not repented of, and washed away in the blood of Jesus Christ, it will abide upon your souls to all eternity. And will any of you continue in a state of guilt and condemnation, when God is ready to put you into "the fountain that was opened for sin and for uncleanness[i]?" Know assuredly that "the blood of Jesus Christ will cleanse from all sin[k];" and that, being once cleansed in it, you shall "have no more conscience of sin," so as to be under any distressing apprehensions on account of it[l]; since, whilst it "purges you from an evil conscience, it will stimulate you to serve the living God[m]."]

2. A partial and deluded conscience—

[It is surprising how partial the consciences of many are: they can see no evil at all in some things which suit their inclination, whilst they are shocked at the very mention of other things which are in themselves altogether indifferent: "they strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel." The Pharisees would not for the world eat with unwashen hands; but they would devour widows' houses without a moment's hesitation: they would bribe a man to betray his Lord; but, on the restoration of the money, they would on no account put it into the treasury, because it was the price of blood. Thus it is at this day, with persons of every description. We should be glad if we could say that all religious professors were exempted from the charge; but there are many even of them who would account it a heinous crime to deviate from the rules of their own sect or party, who yet will violate both truth and honesty in their dealings with the world. Such persons will say, "My heart shall not reproach me as long as I live;" but we hope their consciences will reproach them before it is too late: for, if they continue to harbour any one allowed sin, whether in act or in heart, they are no better than self-deceiving hypocrites; and their religion will be found vain at last[n].]

3. An over-confident and unfeeling conscience—

[Though a scrupulous conscience is an evil to be lamented, yet a tender conscience is above all things to be desired: it should

[i] Compare Zech. xii. 1. with John v. 2-9.
[k] 1 John i. 7. [l] Heb. x. 2. [m] Heb. ix. 9, 14. [n] Jam. i. 27.

should be kept tender, even as the apple of our eye. The smallest deviation from our duty, either to God or man, ought to pain us in our inmost souls. How lovely was the spirit of David, when his heart smote him for cutting off the skirt of Saul's garment, when, in the judgment of the world at large, he would have been justified in putting his malignant and implacable enemy to death. Thus should it be with us: if only a thought of our heart be in any respect contrary to God's mind and will, we should be humbled in the dust; and our incessant labour should be, "to stand perfect and complete in all the will of God;" or, in other words, to be "holy as God is holy," and "perfect even as our Father which is in heaven is perfect."]

CCCXX.

SPIRITUAL DECLENSION CONSIDERED.

Job xxix. 2. *O that I were as in months past!*

TO take a retrospect of our past lives is always profitable: but it is not unfrequently attended with much pain. The man that has lived as without God in the world, how can he look back upon the days that are past, without feeling the deepest anguish of mind? Nor is a review of former days less distressing to one who from a life of spiritual peace and joy has fallen into a state of darkness and of spiritual death.

The change which Job had experienced, was both outward, in all that related to the body, and inward, in what related to his soul. The circumstances attendant on that change were so peculiar, that they are but little applicable to the Church at large: and the design of God in them was also very peculiar; it being not so much to punish the sin which yet remained in his servant, as to display, confirm, and augment the grace that had been imparted to him. Into these peculiarities we shall not enter; because, though they might instruct and amuse our minds, they would not come home to men's business and bosoms, or lead us sufficiently to a contemplation of ourselves. His temporal calamities we shall altogether overlook: and his spiritual troubles we shall notice

notice only in a general view, as affording occasion for us to take a review of our past lives, and to see whether we have not reason for a similar complaint, "O that I were as in months past!" There had been a time when, as Job says, "the candle of God had shined upon his head, so that by the light of it he had been enabled to walk through darkness," and when "God himself was with him," and "the secret of God was upon his tabernacle." So it may have been with us; and yet a most painful reverse have taken place. And so important do I conceive this subject to be, that I shall endeavour to cast upon it what light I can in the compass of one short discourse. A person anxious to know the state of his soul before God, would be ready to ask, *What are the usual causes and precursors of spiritual declension? Whereby shall I ascertain whether it has taken place in me?* and *how, if such a change have taken place, shall I regain my former happy condition?* To answer these questions, I will proceed, in a brief and partial manner, to point out the *sources*, the *evidences*, and the *remedies* of spiritual declension.

I. The sources of it—

It is obvious that, were we to attempt a full discussion of the subject, a whole volume would scarcely suffice for the consideration of it. We must therefore of necessity confine ourselves to a few leading topics, leaving a multitude of others, of nearly equal importance, untouched.

Amongst the sources which I will specify, the first is,

1. A remissness in secret duties—

[The duties of the closet, such as reading, and meditation, and prayer, are indispensably necessary to the welfare of the soul. As well might we hope that our bodies should retain their vigour without food and exercise, as that our souls should flourish without communion with God. The vegetable creation will not thrive without light; nor will the seed of Divine grace which has been sown in our hearts grow without the light of God's countenance. But this returns not unsought, like the light of day: it must be sought, and sought with care too, or else it will be withheld, and the soul will be left to languish in darkness and distress. And

in this respect is that word of our Saviour verified, "To him that hath, shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not, shall be taken away even that which he hath[a]."]

2. An indulgence of some secret lust—

[Sin, of whatever kind it be, is "a worm at the root," which will soon make the fairest gourd in the universe to wither. It matters not what the sin be: it may be pride, or envy, or malice, or revenge, or lust, or covetousness, or discontent, or sloth, or unbelief, or vain conceit, or any other: every man has some "sin which more easily besets him:" and that, whatever it may be, will grieve the Spirit of God, and provoke God to hide his face from us. "Sin of any kind will separate between him and us," and deprive us of all his gracious communications; "If I regard iniquity in my heart," says David, "the Lord will not hear me." And our blessed Lord tells us, that "a right hand, or a right eye," not sacrificed and abandoned, will plunge us, both body and soul, "into hell-fire[b]." No wonder then that any man declines in spiritual health, whilst some unsubdued sin lurks within him, and, "like a canker, eats up" all his strength[c].]

3. An undue and unnecessary entangling of ourselves in the affairs of this life—

[All have of necessity *some* worldly engagements, which it is their bounden duty diligently to perform. And many have a very great portion of their time necessarily occupied with worldly pursuits: nor are they at liberty to withdraw from a post which, though painful and difficult, God has evidently assigned them. But when we *needlessly* multiply our temporal concerns, we must expect to suffer loss in those which are spiritual. Our Saviour, in the parable of the sower, tells us, that the cause of vast multitudes not bringing forth fruit to perfection is, that "the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word that has been sown in their hearts, and render it unfruitful." A man who "loads his feet with thick clay," or suffers a long garment to impede the motion of his feet, does not wonder that he makes an inadequate progress in a race: and as little can it be wondered at, if a person encumbered, unnecessarily or beyond a due proportion, with the cares or pleasures of this life, make not his profiting to appear in the ways of God.]

Supposing a spiritual declension to have taken place in us, what may we expect to be,

II. The evidences of it—

Spiritual

[a] Matt. xiii. 12. [b] Mark ix. 43—48. [c] 2 Tim. ii. 17.

Spiritual decay will doubtless discover itself in every exercise of the soul, even as bodily weakness does in every function of the body. But, to instance it in two or three particulars. We may be sure that a declension has taken place, if we have suffered loss,

1. In the spirituality of our minds—

[In a soul that is in full health, there is a tendency upwards, not unlike that of a vessel filled with light and buoyant air: it is fastened, as it were, by cords to the earth; but it discovers its proper tendency by repeated and continued efforts to ascend: and, as different cords are loosened, its efforts are more and more visible: and, when the last cord is cut asunder, it mounts to the heavens, as the regions it most affects. Thus the soul, in proportion as it is "filled with the Spirit," aspires heavenward. But, if the vessel before referred to lose its buoyant powers, it ceases its aërial flight, and descends upon the earth: and from the effect no one is at a loss to infer the cause.

I will grant, that a pressure of worldly engagements may operate unfavourably in appearance, whilst there is no cause for self-condemnation in reality. The way to form an accurate judgment is, not so much to inquire, Whether the flights of the soul heavenward are less frequent than they were under different circumstances? as, What the tendencies of the soul are, when it is left at liberty to pursue the course it most affects? And, if in these seasons it evinces a heaviness and an indisposition to ascend, then may it be clearly seen, that the soul has suffered loss; and in proportion as it ceases to dwell in God by faith and love, God will cease to dwell in it by the vital energies of his Spirit: and then "its root will soon be as rottenness; and its blossom will go up as dust[d]."

2. In the tenderness of our conscience—

[The effect of grace is to make the conscience tender as the apple of the eye; to make us dread sin, and flee temptation, and use all possible means for the preserving of the soul pure before God. In one who is walking close with God, even a mote will not be suffered willingly to retain the place it has invaded; but will be wept out with tears of penitence and shame. But, if the conscience have lost its sensibility, so that it can now endure without emotion a feeling which would once have filled it with the acutest anguish, what shall we say? Can that soul be in a flourishing condition?

We must distinguish doubtless between a scrupulous and a tender conscience: for increasing light may have lessened its scrupulosity about indifferent matters, whilst yet its tenderness is undiminished

[d] Isai. v. 24.

undiminished in reference to every acknowledged duty. But, if the smaller commissions of sin or neglects of duty pass with less grief and indignation against them than formerly, the authority of God is weakened in the soul, the hatred of sin diminished; and, if a remedy be not speedily applied, "the last state of that soul will be worse than its beginning."]

3. In the vigour of our exertions for God—

[A man that is right with God will always be saying, "What shall I render unto the Lord for all the benefits that he hath done unto me?" No labour will be grudged, no sacrifice accounted great, if only God may be glorified in him. But if the self-denial which once appeared unworthy of a thought is now become a burthen, and the efforts which once we made in the service of our God are now relaxed, we obviously have declined in real piety. Were we right, we should never think we had attained any thing as long as any thing was left to be attained, or done any thing as long as any thing was left to be done: but, forgetting what was behind, we should reach forward to that which was before: and our grief would be, that we could not do a thousand times more for Him who has done and suffered so much for us. If we are faint and weary in well-doing, it is plain and indisputable that our spiritual health has declined.]

Such backslidings however are not incurable, if only we apply, according to God's prescription,

III. The remedies of it—

We may regain our former state,

1. By a renewed and more solemn repentance—

[This is the remedy prescribed by our Lord himself to the angel of the Church of Ephesus, when he "had left his first love:" "Remember from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do thy first works[e]." We must look back and search out the occasions of our departure from God: we must then examine the instances wherein our departure has appeared. For these we must abase ourselves before God in dust and ashes: and we must again and again apply to the blood of sprinkling for the remission of them. Not content with this, we must return to those better ways which we have forsaken, and resolutely give up ourselves with all our powers to the service of our God. If our grief was deep at our first turning unto God, it ought to be tenfold deeper now, in proportion as our guilt by reason of our backslidings from God is aggravated beyond that which we contracted by our rebellions in the days of our ignorance. We should add fasting also to prayer. If, as our Lord says, "The days come when the Bridegroom shall be *taken away* from them; and *then shall they fast*;" how much more ought we to fast, when by our own unfaithfulness

[e] Rev. ii. 4, 5.

faithfulness we have *driven* the Bridegroom from us! We need only mark the neglect into which this duty has fallen, in order to see how low the standard of religion is, which is current in the world. But, if we would recover the peace and purity that we have lost, we must return unto God with the deepest contrition, and wash us from our guilt in the fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness.]

2. By getting a sense of redeeming love upon the soul—

[Without this, repentance will be of little avail. That will prepare the soul; but it is a sight of Christ only that will perfect it. *That* casts down; but *this* will raise us up. There is nothing that will effectually constrain the soul, but a sense of the love of Christ shed abroad in the heart. *That* regained, all else will be easy. And that is to be regained, not by slavish exertions, but by the simple exercise of faith. As in the first instance we come to him, not seeking to heal ourselves first, and then applying to him as the Physician, but by a simple dependence on his blood and righteousness; so we must do at all times and under all circumstances, trusting in him only as "our Righteousness and strength." This reliance on his promises will alone cleanse us; and this view of his glory will alone change us into his image from glory to glory by the Spirit of our God.]

3. By keeping the nearness of eternity in view—

[This also is prescribed by our blessed Lord, as the means of augmented watchfulness, and of a more entire preparation for death and judgment. We know not at what hour our Lord will come. For aught that we know to the contrary, this very night our souls may be required of us. Now, if we bore this in mind, should we rest in a cold or lukewarm state? Should we not endeavour to have our loins girded and our lamps trimmed, and ourselves as those who wait for the coming of their Lord? Could we but, like the Apostle, learn to "die daily," we should make no account either of labours or of sufferings, "if by any means we might attain unto the resurrection of the dead[f]."]

ADDRESS—

1. Those who are conscious that they have occasion for this heart-rending complaint—

[Truly, Brethren, it is a painful thing to look back upon times and seasons, when, in comparison with the present, you had the enjoyment of God in your souls. What self-reproach do you feel in the retrospect, and what misgivings in the prospect of the eternity that awaits you! We are told that persons in your situation have "a certain fearful looking-for of judgment."

[f] Phil. iii. 10, 11.

ment[g]." Be thankful however, that it is not yet too late to regain your former peace; yea, you may have it yet increased and multiplied an hundred-fold. God has indeed said, that "the backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways[h]:" but he has also said, "Return unto me, ye backsliding children; and I will heal your backslidings, and love you freely; and mine anger shall be turned away from you[i]." Return then in dependence on his promised mercy: then shall it be with you as in the months that are past; yea, and your last days shall be your best.]

2. Those who are making a progress in the divine life—

[Thrice happy souls! "To you to live is Christ; and to die it shall be gain." How sweet is it to have the testimony of our conscience that we are living nigh to God, and walking daily in the light of his countenance! This is the way to be truly happy. This is the way to secure peace in a dying hour. "Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright; for the end of that man is peace." Go on then; but not in your own strength, nor with unhallowed confidence. "Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall." Yet let not this consideration fill you with slavish fear, but only make you watchful and dependent on God. God is able to keep you; and he will keep the feet of his saints; and, if only you commit your way entirely to him, he will "preserve you blameless unto his heavenly kingdom."

"Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen[k]."]

[g] Heb. x. 26, 27.
[h] Prov. xiv. 14.
[i] Jer. iii. 22. Hos. xiv. 1, 2, 4.
[k] Jude 24, 25.

CCCXXI.

JOB'S CHARACTER.

Job xxix. 11—16. *When the ear heard me, then it blessed me; and when the eye saw me, it gave witness to me; because I delivered the poor that cried, and the fatherless, and him that had none to help him. The blessing of him that was ready to perish came upon me: and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. I put on righteousness, and it clothed me: my judgment was a robe and a diadem. I was eyes to the blind, and feet was I to the lame. I was a father to the poor; and the cause which I knew not, I searched out.*

TO boast of one's own goodness is a sure mark of vanity and folly: of vanity, because it betrays an undue

undue desire of man's applause; and of folly, because it defeats its own end, and injures the reputation which it is intended to exalt. Nevertheless there are occasions on which we may, without any impropriety, declare facts, notwithstanding the mention of them does tend to proclaim our own praise. If, for instance, we have been calumniated, we may vindicate ourselves; and, if false charges have been adduced against us, we may refute them, by a candid and explicit statement of the truth. It was in this way that Job was led to speak of himself as he does in the passage before us. His friends had not only concluded from his extraordinary sufferings that he must have been peculiarly wicked, but they had undertaken even to specify crimes of which he had been guilty, and for which this afflictive dispensation had been sent[a]. It was in answer to these unfounded charges that he delivered, what appears like an eulogium upon himself, but what was indeed nothing more than an appeal to facts for the establishment of his own innocence.

To *us* it is a singular benefit that such a statement was ever made; because it shews us, not only what our character ought to be, but what has actually been attained. In order to make a suitable improvement of the passage, we propose to shew,

I. The excellence of this character—

From the particulars which are here enumerated we may distinctly notice,

1. The character itself—

[The first thing that attracts our notice is, Job's *diffusive benevolence*. Misery, wherever it could be found, was the object of his tender compassion and assiduous regard: and the greater that misery was, the more imperious did he consider his call to relieve it. Were they poor, or blind, or lame, or widows, or fatherless, or friendless, he felt as a father towards them, and laboured to supply their every want. In the exercise of that benevolence he shewed the most *active zeal*. He did not stay till his interposition was sought for; but went to the most frequented parts of the city, and "prepared his seat in the street[b]," in order that all might have the readiest access to him, and be encouraged to

[a] Ch. xxii. 5—10. [b] ver. 7.

to spread their wants before him. Cases of considerable difficulty often occurred; but he spared no pains to inform himself of whatever might throw light upon the question, and to search to the bottom the truth or falsehood of every assertion, the force or nullity of every claim. No labour was accounted great, when it might tend to the relief of trouble or the confirmation of right. To this he added *unblemished integrity*. Nothing could for a moment bias his judgment, or induce him to swerve from the path of equity. It sometimes happened that he had to deal with powerful oppressors; but he was unawed by power, as well as unmoved by wealth: yea, the more power he found on the side of injustice, the more determinately he set himself to reduce it within its proper bounds: "he brake the jaws of the wicked, and plucked the spoil out of his teeth:" and the effecting of this he accounted more honourable than any ornaments, either of magisterial robes, or an imperial diadem[c].]

2. The excellence of it—

[See what was thought of it by all who beheld it in Job: "When the ear heard me, then it blessed me; and when the eye saw me, it gave witness to me." And we ask, Where is the man in the whole universe that must not admire it? What part of it is there that is not worthy of our imitation? That such a character will not be censured, we by no means affirm: but no man will censure benevolence, or zeal, or integrity, *as such;* they must first put a wrong construction upon it, before they will venture to utter one word against it.

From viewing it *in itself*, let us contemplate it *in its aspect on society*. What incalculable good must not arise from it! See but a single *Magistrate* possessed of wisdom, of integrity, of power: see him laying out all his time, his strength, his influence in the composing of differences and in the relieving of every species of distress: see him doing this with disinterested zeal and unwearied diligence: will not such an one be esteemed as the "father of the poor?" and will he not "make many a widow's heart to sing for joy?" See a *Minister* of such a description, devoting himself with equal zeal to the administering of temporal comforts to the poor, and superadding a similar attention to their spiritual necessities: to how many will he be made a source of good, becoming "eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame!" Surely in many instances "the blessing of him that was ready to perish will come on such a Minister, and the eyes and ears of multitudes will bear witness to him. The same is equally true of *all that are in private life*, according to the extent of their sphere and the steadiness of their exertions. And if once such were to become the general character of society, it would go far to banish evil, moral as well as temporal, from the world.]

The

[c] ver. 14.

The excellence of this character being established, we will proceed to mark,

II. The importance of cultivating it in ourselves, and of encouraging it in others—

1. Of cultivating it in ourselves—

[Were there nothing more than the acquiring of such intrinsic worth, and the being so assimilated to Jesus, "who went about doing good," it were most desirable that we should be imitators of this holy man. But a resemblance to him is not merely *desirable;* it is *necessary:* for *by our conformity to his character we must judge of our state before God,* and *by it we shall be judged in the last day.*

The highest attainments, whether of knowledge or of faith, are nothing in God's estimation, without an active, constant, self-denying exercise of love[d]. *This* is the test by which we are to try our religion. We are told expressly, "that pure and undefiled religion is, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction[e]:" and that by "bearing one another's burthens we fulfil the law of Christ[f]." Without this, our faith is no better than the faith of devils[g], and all our professions of love to God are mere hypocrisy. God himself repeatedly appeals to us on this very subject, as though he were willing to abide by the testimony of our own consciences[h]. To have any just evidence therefore that we belong to Christ, we must tread in the steps of holy Job. This is the rule prescribed by that loving and beloved disciple, John: "My little children, let us love, not in word and in tongue, but in deed and in truth: for hereby know we that we are of the truth; and shall assure our hearts before him[i]." These are "the things that accompany salvation[k];" and by abounding in them we shall obtain a full assurance of hope[l], and an abundant entrance into the kingdom of our Lord[m].

But these habits are also necessary, because by our proficiency in them we shall be judged in the last day. Who can read the account of the day of judgment as given us by Christ himself, and not wish that he had cultivated more the dispositions of Job? Who that lives for himself, does not see cause to tremble? Let us deeply consider and diligently weigh the declarations of Christ[n], and we shall need no further arguments to prove the importance of cultivating love — — —]

2. Of encouraging it in others—

[It is thought by many, that it is better to distribute their alms themselves, than to do good through the medium of others. We

[d] 1 Cor. xiii. 1—3. [e] Jam. i. 27. [f] Gal. vi. 2.
[g] Jam. ii. 14—19. [h] 1 John iij. 17. & iv. 20.
[i] 1 John iii. 18, 19. [k] Heb. vi. 9, 10. [l] ib. ver. 11.
[m] 2 Pet. i. 7, 10, 11. [n] Matt. xxv. 34—36, 41—43.

We grant that all may find proper objects of charity within their own immediate neighbourhood; and that, if every one would exert himself within his own circle, there would be little comparative need of persons to dispense our alms for us. But we know that some want time, some inclination, some ability, to seek out the poor, and to impart to them spiritual instruction with temporal relief. Though therefore we certainly admit that it is well to reserve a portion of our alms for our own personal distribution, yet we cannot but say that it is of peculiar importance to encourage the activity of others; for by that, *more extensive good is done—more grace is called forth into exercise*—and *more honour is brought to religion.*

More extensive good is done.—Numberless are the cases wherein the poor require more assistance than it would be possible for an individual to afford them. It is on this account that hospitals and other public charities have been so universally established. For the same reason a society for relieving the poor must be of the greatest utility, because that can be done out of a public fund which cannot be done out of a private purse. Moreover, where persons who have some degree of leisure and ability devote themselves to the various offices of charity, it must be supposed that they will acquire a greater fitness for the work, and consequently will perform it to more advantage. Besides many, however fit for the work, and well disposed towards it, have not time to spare; and consequently much good must be left undone, if those who have time be not encouraged and enabled to improve it in this way.

More grace also is called forth into exercise.—We will suppose that in either case the same degree of grace is exercised both by the donor and the receiver of the alms: still the employing of the services of others has greatly the advantage; because it calls forth their graces, and strengthens in them an habit of benevolence. Methinks, it is like the training of soldiers for war; which gives them a martial spirit, and renders them more efficient in their work. Many there are, possessed of wisdom and piety, who yet, on account of the narrowness of their own circumstances, are unable to visit the poor; because they cannot shew their sympathy in such a way as to render it acceptable to the poor themselves. But, if they be employed as the dispensers of the charity of others, they have scope for all the finer feelings of their souls, and are enabled to "rejoice with them that rejoice, as well as to weep with them that weep."

We may add further, that *more honour also is brought to religion.*—It is said by the enemies of the Gospel, that the doctrine of salvation by faith alone leads to a neglect and contempt of good works. But, with Job, we will appeal to facts: Who are they that most abound in good works; those who *talk* about them, and profess to make them the ground of their hopes, or those

those who build all their hopes of salvation on Christ alone? Amongst which of these two classes shall we find those, who, not having funds of their own, are willing to become the almoners of others, that they may exert themselves with more effect in every office of love both to the bodies and the souls of men? The matter is too notorious to admit a doubt. And does not this tend to the honour of religion? and do not they consult the interests of religion, who encourage such societies? Yes; and our answer to all who decry our faith is, "Outdo us in good works."] *

* Here the excellence of *any particular charity* may be stated, with a suitable exhortation to support it.

CCCXXII.

THE CERTAINTY OF DEATH.

Job xxx. 23. *I know that thou wilt bring me to death, and to the house appointed for all living.*

WE cannot certainly know the ultimate intentions of Providence from any thing we either see or feel. A man to whom God has given a robust constitution, cannot therefore be sure that he shall attain to old age: nor can a man that is bowed down with complicated diseases, be certain that his health shall not be restored. Presumption too often attends the former state, and despair the latter; as appears in the instance of Job. In his prosperity he said, "I shall die in my nest," without living to experience any material trials: and in his adversity he felt confident, that God, whom now he thought his enemy, was bringing him down to the grave; and that his present troubles would terminate in death. In both these opinions he was mistaken: he did experience very heavy afflictions: and those were succeeded by brighter days of happiness than ever he had before known. But though he erred as to the expectations he had formed respecting the time and manner of his death, his general assertion was founded in truth, and conveys to us a most instructive lesson. Let us consider,

I. The truth affirmed—

Nothing can be more certain than that we shall all die—

[The grave is "the house appointed for all living." Adam was doomed to it for his transgression[a]—and all his posterity have been involved in his sentence[b]—It is not in the power of wisdom, of strength, or riches, to avert the stroke of death[c]—All, whatever be their rank or condition, must pay the debt of nature[d];—whether we have lived in a palace or a cottage, the grave is the house in which we must all abide at last—The righteous are, in this respect, on a par with the wicked[e]—The moment that God says to any, "Thy soul is required of thee," "his body must return to its native dust, and his spirit must return unto Him that gave it[f]."—]

And this is a truth universally acknowledged—

[Every one "knows" that he himself must die. We look back to the Ante-diluvian world; and though we find that they lived eight or nine hundred years, they all died at last. Since that time, successive generations have come and passed away. Our own near ancestors are removed, and "their places know them no more." There are few amongst us who have not within a very few years lost some friend or relative. And we all feel, that if we have not any disorder at present, we are at least liable to those diseases and decays which are daily weakening the strongest constitutions, and executing the Divine appointments in bringing us to the grave.

The *time* of our death, as we observed before, is known to none: but its approach is not for one moment doubted by any[g].]

As this thing is so plain, we hasten to,

II. The improvement we should make of it—

The certainty of death should,

1. Moderate our regards to the things of this world—

[Were our present possessions to abide with us for ever, there were some reason for our eagerness respecting them: but, as they are so soon to be removed from us, or we from them, it is folly to let them occupy so large a portion of our affections———We are not greatly elated with the comforts of an inn, where we are to stop but an hour; nor are we greatly depressed with any want of comforts which we may find there: the thought of our stay there being so short, renders us comparatively indifferent to our present accommodations. Thus the thought, that "the Lord is at hand," should cause us to make "our moderation known unto all men[h]"———This is elsewhere enforced by the Apostle in relation to every thing, whether pleasant or painful; all is but *a pageant*

[a] Gen. ii. 17. & iii. 19. [b] Rom. v. 12. [c] Ps. xlix. 7—10.
[d] Eccl. viii. 8. [e] Rom. viii. 10. Zech. i. 5.
[f] Eccl. xii. 7. [g] Eccl. ix. 5. [h] Phil. iv. 5.

pageant passing by; and whether the spectacle be mournful or joyous, it is scarcely sooner arrived than it vanishes from before our eyes[i]. Our joys and our sorrows will both appear light and momentary, when viewed in reference to the transitoriness of what is visible, and the endless duration of the things invisible[k] — — —].

2. Make us diligent in preparing for a better world—

[The time allotted us here, is given on purpose that we may prepare for another, and a better state. If the present hour be not seized, all opportunity of securing happiness in another world will be lost — — — Should not this thought stimulate us to activity in the concerns of our souls? Solomon was clearly of this opinion[l]; and so must every one, who reflects a moment on the comparative importance of time and eternity. If we could return hither after having once departed, or begin in the invisible world the work which we have neglected here, we might have some excuse: but to know that death and the grave are ready to swallow us up, and yet to trifle with the interests of the soul, which, if neglected now, are gone for ever, this, I say, is a madness, which credulity itself could never imagine to exist, if its existence were not daily and hourly before our eyes — — — The prayer of Moses is that which reason dictates, and which God approves[m].]

ADDRESS—

1. Those who know this truth, and *feel* it—

[Happy they whose minds are by meditation and prayer rendered familiar with death: and who know, that while the grave is the receptacle of their bodies, they have for their souls an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens[n] — — — Happy they who in the view of this are cleaving unto Christ with full purpose of heart. O that we all might be like-minded, living in an habitual dependence upon Christ, and in a zealous performance of his will! Then may we look forward to our dissolution with joy, accounting death our gain[o], and placing it amongst our choicest treasures[p] — — —]

2. Those who know and *disregard* it—

[This, alas! forms the greater part of every congregation; insomuch, that they who act up to this truth are gazed at, "as signs

[i] 1 Cor. vii. 29—31. σχῆμα. [k] 2 Cor. iv. 17, 18.
[l] Eccl. ix. 10. [m] Ps. xc. 12.
[n] If this be a subject for a Funeral Sermon, the person's character may be mentioned here—Thus; "Such was the state of *him* whose loss we now deplore."
[o] Phil. i. 21. [p] 1 Cor. iii. 22.

signs and as wonders" in the world. But how will this supineness appear in a little time? We do not positively say, that you will look with regret on your present conduct on your death-bed; for many die as stupid, as ignorant, and as hardened as they lived. But we are well assured, that you will have far other thoughts of your conduct as soon as you come into the presence of your Judge———Let me then intreat you to "redeem the present time," and to "work while it is day; for the night cometh wherein no man can work—"]

CCCXXIII.

JOB'S COMPASSION FOR THE POOR.

Job xxx. 25. *Did not I weep for him that was in trouble? Was not my soul grieved for the poor?*

IN the midst of any heavy calamities, a recollection that we have abused the season of prosperity must add greatly to our distress: whereas a consciousness that we have endeavoured to fulfil the duties of our station, must afford a rich consolation to the afflicted mind. It was a matter of self-congratulation to David under the persecutions that he met with from his inveterate enemies, that he had done nothing to provoke their enmity; and that, instead of retaliating their injuries even in thought or desire, he had tenderly felt for them in their troubles, and earnestly sought their welfare[a]. To Job also this thought was a source of much comfort, under his accumulated trials. In the passage before us he complains bitterly of his friends, and too rashly also concerning God. And the words of the text *may be* considered as reflecting on them for treating him otherwise than he had deserved. But we rather suppose the words were introduced as a consolatory reflection, that, though unkindly treated under his own afflictions, he could appeal to God he had conducted himself differently towards others: "Did not I weep for him that was in trouble? Was not my soul grieved for the poor?"

There are two observations naturally arising from these

[a] Ps. xxxv. 11—14.

these words, which we shall make the foundation of the following discourse:

I. The poor, when they are in trouble, are great objects of compassion—

[The poor, whilst they enjoy their health, and are under no extraordinary pressure, are quite as happy as the rich. If they have fewer comforts, they do not feel the want of them; and they are, in a great measure, strangers to those vexations and disappointments, which are the usual attendants of wealth. They, for the most part, enjoy their homely meal with a keener appetite and relish, than they who are fed with delicacies: and, while their richer and more luxurious masters are wakeful upon beds of down, they rest in comfort on a bed of straw, and "their sleep is sweet unto them." If we had complete access both to the rich and poor, and could perfectly weigh the personal and domestic happiness of each, I am persuaded we should find the scale very generally turn in favour of the poor: for what they lose in respect of carnal indulgences, is more than made up to them by peace and contentment.

But when sickness comes, then the inconveniences of poverty begin to be deeply felt. The well-earned pittance which was adequate to the wants of a man and his family while in health, is utterly insufficient to procure medical assistance, and to provide those comforts which are requisite for the alleviation of pain, or the restoration of health and strength. The industrious husband finds all his exertions ineffectual; and is reduced to the necessity of leaving his wife or child to languish without help, or of plunging himself into inextricable difficulties, by his endeavours to obtain a suitable, but uncertain, relief.

But suppose the head of the family himself to be seized with sickness; then with increasing wants there comes an increased incapacity to supply them. The little stream that before nourished and refreshed the family, is cut off, and ceases to flow in its accustomed channel. What now can he do? Perhaps it may be said, "Let him apply to his parish for relief." True; but it is painful to a generous mind to become burthensome to others. He who has been accustomed to maintain his family by his own labour, does not like to become a pensioner on the bounty of others without an absolute and irresistible necessity. He knows, possibly from his own experience, that many are obliged to pay rates for the support of others, while they themselves scarcely know how to provide for their own subsistence. Hence he nobly struggles with his difficulties; and carries the conflict perhaps beyond the bounds of prudence, while from tenderness to others he forgets the regard which he should shew to himself and his own family. Conceive then his distress: behold him debilitated with disease, and racked with pain; behold him destitute of the remedies that might

might remove his disorder: see him incurring debts which it will be difficult for him ever to discharge. Perhaps at last he applies for relief; and then is told, that, while he has this or that comfort, which the industry of former years had enabled him to procure, he cannot be relieved. See him then compelled to sell first one thing, then another; thus stripping himself and family of the little comforts that remained to them; and, after all, witnessing the privations, the wants, the miseries of his benumbed and starving dependents. This is no uncommon picture: it is seen in every town, and almost in every village, through the kingdom; though, probably, less in this than in any other nation upon earth. And is not such a person an object of compassion? Must not he be lost to all the feelings of humanity, who does not "weep over him, and whose soul is not grieved for him?"]

Yes; we must declare to all, that,

II. To exercise compassion towards them is one of the principal duties of a Christian—

There is no duty more strongly inculcated than that of compassion to the poor: every species of argument is used in Scripture in order to enforce the observance of it. It is enforced by arguments taken,

1. From political expediency—

[God does not disdain to urge upon us such considerations as are calculated to affect even a selfish mind.

Does not every one desire to relieve himself? This we do, in fact, when we relieve the poor: for all of us are members of one body: consequently our neighbour demands the same attention from us as ourselves[b]: and, in neglecting him, we "hide ourselves from our own flesh[c]."

Are not we ourselves liable to fall into adversity? No man knows what circumstances he may be brought into before he die. We have seen in our day princes and nobles subsisting upon charity, and many of them on a very slender pittance too. Would not we then, if reduced to want, desire to find compassion in the breasts of others? And, if so, ought we not to exercise it ourselves[d]? Methinks our charity should be extended to the utmost verge of prudence and propriety[e].

Would we desire Divine consolations under our afflictions? To be charitable to others is one way to secure them. Hear what God has said: "Blessed is the man that considereth (not slightly pitieth, but with a deep interest in their welfare *considereth*) the poor and needy: the Lord shall deliver him in the time

[b] 1 Cor. xii. 25, 26.
[c] Heb. xiii. 3.
[d] Isai. lviii. 7.
[e] Eccl. xi. 1, 2.

time of trouble . . . The Lord will make all his bed in his sickness[f]." What greater inducement to charity would we desire, than such a hope and prospect as this?

Would we get the best possible interest for our money? There is no such bank in the universe as this. To enrich ourselves by giving away, and by giving the very "*first-fruits*, and that too *of all* our increase," may seem strange indeed: reason would say that it was the way to impoverish ourselves: but God tells[g] us that it is the way to "fill our barns with plenty, and to make our presses burst out with new wine[g]." And experience proves, that, "if we give to others, men will in our necessity give into our bosom, good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over[h]."

To complete this argument—*Would we keep our wealth for ever?* This is the way to do so. They who hoard up their riches must leave them all behind them[hh]: but they who dispose of their wealth in acts of charity, carry it with them into the eternal world, where it shall be restored to them with interest[i]. They "lend their money to the Lord, who has pledged himself to repay them[j]" in full, yea, to recompense them in the resurrection of the just[k]; and, provided they have acted from Christian principles, to give them eternal life[l]. He has even promised to proportion their harvest to the seed they have sown[m]. So that if "the children of light were as wise in their generation as the children of this world," they would, like the poor widow, and the first Christians, be ready to give their whole substance to the poor.]

2. From Christian necessity—

[Here the arguments are far more forcible and impressive.

The exercise of charity is imposed on us with the authority of a law by Christ himself. And shall we despise that law? Yea rather, when it comes to us so recommended and enjoined, shall we not labour to the uttermost to fulfil it? This is an argument urged by the great Apostle: "Bear ye one another's burthens, and so fulfil the law of Christ[n]."

Our obedience to this law is the criterion whereby we must judge of our regard to Christ.—St. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to liberality, in order "to prove the sincerity of their love[o]." And St. John tells us that all our professions are hypocrisy, and all our experiences a delusion, if we do not exercise this virtue[p].

Would

[f] Ps. xli. 1—3. See also Isai. lviii. 10, 11. "Draw out thy *soul*," not thy purse merely.

[g] Prov. xiii. 7. & iii. 9, 10.

[h] Luke vi. 38.

[hh] Luke xii. 33.

[i] Luke xviii. 22.

[j] Prov. xix. 17.

[k] Luke xiv. 12—14.

[l] 1 Tim. vi. 17—19.

[m] 2 Cor. ix. 6.

[n] Gal. vi. 2.

[o] 2 Cor. viii. 8.

[p] 1 John iii. 17.

Would we then contentedly rest in a state, wherein all our pretensions to religion are vain? Would we proclaim to all men that we have no love to the Father or to Christ? If not, we must delight ourselves in doing good according to our ability.

Our exercise, or neglect, of charity will be the ground of the sentence that in the last day shall be passed upon us.—The Judge of quick and dead informs us, that the strictest inquiries will be made relative to this point; and that they who have not relieved him in his poor members, will be bidden to depart accursed; while they who have manifested a tender regard for the poor shall be welcomed by him as the children of his heavenly Father, and be exalted by him to the possession of his eternal kingdom[q]. To the same effect he elsewhere says, "Blessed are the merciful; for they shall obtain mercy[r]:" and St. James, on the contrary part, says, "He shall have judgment without mercy that hath shewed no mercy[s]."

Weigh now these considerations, and see if they do not amount to necessity; and whether we must not say, 'Woe is unto me, if I do not cultivate a compassionate and liberal spirit!']

TO CONCLUDE—

[We have inculcated the necessity of liberality and compassion. But let us not be misunderstood: alms-giving does *not make* us Christians; *but only proves* us so. Nor does it prove us Christians, unless it arise from Christian principles. It is faith in Christ that *makes* us his; and obedience to his will *proves* us to be his.

But we must further guard the subject from mistake. It is *not* a transient emotion, or *a falling tear*, that will suffice (for many will shed a tear at a moving tale, who have no principle of love in their hearts); but "*our souls must be grieved*" for the poor: we must lay to heart their wants and miseries, and make it our study and delight to administer to their relief*.

Let not any then be contented with approving the things which they have heard, or with wishing well to the institution that has been recommended to their care: for St. James justly says, "If ye merely say to a brother or sister, Be ye warmed, be ye filled; and yet neglect to give them the things they need; what doth it profit[t]?" Such compassion will neither profit them nor you. Let such of you then as profess yourselves "the elect of God, put on bowels of mercies[u]:" yea, let all of us stir up within our own breasts a tender concern for the welfare of our fellow-creatures; and so act now, that on our dying bed we may appeal to God himself, "Did I not weep for him that was in trouble? Was not my soul grieved for the poor?"]

[q] Matt. xxv. 34—46. [r] Matt. v. 7. [s] Jam. ii. 13.
[t] Jam. ii. 15, 16. [u] Col. iii. 12.

* Here the particular institution, or occasion, may be mentioned; and the usefulness of the particular charity insisted on.

CCCXXIV.

SPIRITUAL IDOLATRY.

Job xxxi. 24, 25, 28. *If I have made gold my hope, or have said to the fine gold, Thou art my confidence; if I have rejoiced because mine hand had gotten much;.....This also were an iniquity to be punished by the judge: for I should have denied the God that is above.*

HATEFUL as boasting is, and justly condemned both by God and man, there are occasions when it is proper, and indeed necessary. For instance; when a character has been grossly calumniated, and can be vindicated only by an appeal to facts, those facts may be adduced, however much the recital of them may tend to proclaim our own praise. Samuel was constrained to assert the equity of his own administration, when the people cast reflections on him, by desiring to change the form of his government, and to have a king substituted in his place. Paul also, when traduced by persons who sought to destroy his influence in the Church, declared, though much against his will, the honours which had been conferred upon him, and the habits he had invariably maintained *. Indeed we should have known comparatively but little of this blessed Apostle, if he had not been compelled by the malevolence of others to make known the hidden principles by which he had been actuated, and the blameless conduct which he had uniformly pursued: and, so far from blaming him for his boasting, we cannot but be thankful that God suffered him to be so injured, and thereby constrained him in self-defence to make known to us so much of his true character. In like manner we account it a great benefit to the Church, that Job was driven by the heavy accusations that were brought against him, to insist so largely on his own innocence, and to declare so fully the habits and exercises of his former life. Throughout this whole chapter he maintains, in reference to the evils that were laid to his charge, that his conduct had been the

* 2 Cor. xii. 1—11.

the very reverse of what his friends supposed. Had he done this in the spirit of the self-applauding Pharisee, (Luke xviii.) he had acted wrong: but when it was necessary to wipe off the aspersions that were so injuriously cast upon him, he was justified in adducing whatever had a tendency to place his character in its true light.

The part we have just read is a vindication of himself from idolatry. Of idolatry there are two kinds; one actual and manifest; the other virtual and constructive. The actual idolatry is that which is referred to in the verses we have omitted. In the days of Job, or at least in the country where he lived, the Sun and Moon were the only objects to which idolatrous worship was paid: and, as they were out of the reach of the worshippers, the kiss, which was afterwards given to idols as an expression of supreme regard, was transferred to them by means of the hand [b]. But Job declared, that he had never been guilty of this great impiety. Nay more, he had never even in heart given to the creature any portion of that respect which was due only to the Most High God: and if he had, he acknowledged that his sufferings were richly merited, and that as his conduct would have been in fact a denial of his God, he could expect nothing from God but wrath and indignation to all eternity.

In confirmation of this sentiment, we shall consider,

I. The disposition here specified—

An undue regard to wealth is extremely common in the world—

[The possession of wealth is no evil: it then only becomes an evil, when it is accompanied with a measure of affiance or delight in it. But, fallen and depraved as man by nature is, it is exceeding difficult to view wealth with such indifference as we ought. Our blessed Lord states this, when speaking of the rich youth, who renounced and forsook him, rather than part with his great possessions. He first said, "How hardly shall they that *have* riches enter into the kingdom of God! and then, How hardly shall they that *trust in* riches enter into the kingdom of

[b] Hos. xiii. 2.

of God! intending thereby to intimate, that it is almost "impossible" to have them, and not to trust in them[c]. The pleasure that men take in the contemplation of their wealth, whether inherited or acquired, arises from the thought, that they are thereby placed, if not entirely, yet in some measure, beyond the reach of evil; and that, in whatever circumstances they may be, they shall have something which will administer to their comfort[d]. But this is idolatry; as we shall shew under our second head. At present, we content ourselves with observing, that this is the view, which all natural men have of wealth, and the regard which under all circumstances they pay to it.

Whence is it that men are so eager in the pursuit of wealth? Whence is it that they so earnestly desire it for their children? Whence is it that all who come to the possession of wealth or to any great preferment, are congratulated by their friends, and receive those congratulations as suitable to the occasion? Whence is it, on the contrary, that any heavy losses are considered as so great a misfortune, and call forth either real sympathy, or compliments of condolence? Is not all this from a presumption, that wealth and preferment are *in themselves* a certain and a positive good? Does it not all imply a hope or confidence in gold? Would a man who had merely scraped together a great heap of dust, rejoice because his hand had gotten much? and does not the satisfaction he feels from the attainment of riches, shew, that he has formed an erroneous estimate of their value? — — —]

Such then being the disposition specified in our text, we proceed to point out,

II. The sinfulness of it—

To act in any way unworthy of God is to deny him[e]: but to feel such a disposition towards wealth as has been now described, is in a more especial manner to be regarded in this view. It denies, in fact,

1. That God is the *only* source of happiness to man—

[God has called himself "the Fountain of living waters," and has pronounced all creatures to be "broken cisterns that will hold no water." Now what is this but a declaration, that to make us happy is his exclusive prerogative? Doubtless the creature, when he accompanies it with his blessing, is a source of much comfort: but it has nothing in itself: the sun, whose genial warmth is such a fruitful source of blessings to some, destroys all the hopes of

[c] Mark x. 21—27. [d] Hab. ii. 9. [e] Tit. i. 16.

of others, and burns up the very face of the earth. The moon, which gladdens the heart of many a benighted traveller, operates by a secret influence upon the brain, to strike some with madness. Thus wealth also, which to some is the means of exercising a most diffusive benevolence, to others is a curse. What was Nabal the better for his wealth? It only fostered his deep-rooted churlishness, and ultimately proved the occasion of his death. In a word, the creature is nothing but what God is pleased to make it: with his blessing, it will contribute to our happiness; but without his blessing, it is only "vanity and vexation of spirit." If then we place any confidence in it, or suffer it to be a source of complacency to our minds, we ascribe to the creature what is found in none but the Lord Jehovah; to whom alone we should have respect, when we say, "Return unto *thy rest*, O my soul."]

2. That he is *all-sufficient* for that end—

[The man that can look up to a reconciled God in Christ Jesus, has all that he can desire: the wealth of the whole world can add nothing to him. If it be thought that wealth being an *addition*, must of necessity enlarge the comforts of the soul; we would ask, What can a taper *add* to the light of the meridian sun? or who that enjoys the full splendor of that heavenly orb, does not despise the feeble efforts of a taper to augment its lustre? So it is with him who beholds the light of God's glory shining in the face of Jesus Christ: the creature, whoever, or whatever it may be, "has no glory in his eyes by reason of the glory that excelleth." Did the Prodigal any longer affect the husks which the swine ate of, when he was feeding on the fatted calf in his father's house? No surely: nor does *he* ever hunger, who has fed on Jesu's flesh; or thirst, when once he has been refreshed with the water of life———Hear the testimony of one who spoke from his own experience: "We are sorrowful," says the blessed Apostle, "yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing all things[f]."

Now if we desire any earthly good from an idea that it can *of itself* contribute to our happiness, we virtually deny the all-sufficiency of Christ; and by exalting the creature to a participation of his rights, we rob him of his unalienable and incommunicable glory.]

IMPROVEMENT—

1. For reproof—

[Let this character of Job be compared with that of the generality of Christians, and it will afford abundant matter for the deepest humiliation. Certainly, on account of our superior advantages, we ought to possess far greater spirituality of mind than

[f] 2 Cor. vi. 10.

than Job: yet how far below him do the generality even of those who profess religion fall! Perhaps the besetting sin of those who embrace the Gospel is worldliness: it is certain, that very many of them are as eager in the pursuit of wealth as others: and this accounts for the little influence of the word of God upon them: the seed is good, but the soil is bad; and the noxious weeds, by their speedy and incessant growth, keep down the feebler plants of piety in the soul: "the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lust of other things, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful." And here let it be observed, that it is *not the overt act* of covetousness or creature-dependence that is condemned, but *the inward disposition* of the soul: even the complacency of mind that arises from the possession of wealth is itself a positive "denial of the God that is above." Oh, Brethren, enter into your own bosoms, and judge yourselves in relation to this matter. Inquire whether God has such a full possession of your hearts as to render all earthly things vain, empty, and worthless, in your estimation? if not, how can you call God your portion, or imagine that you have formed a proper estimate of the blessings of salvation? Know assuredly, that, if you have just views of Christ, you will regard him as the pearl of great price, "to purchase which a wise merchant will sell all that he has;" and you will say from your inmost soul, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire in comparison of thee."]

2. For instruction in righteousness—

[We learn from our text, wherein a true confession of Christ consists: it is not in an assent to some particular truths, but in a practical and experimental sense of his love overpowering all inferior considerations. To love the Lord Jesus Christ, to "cleave to him with full purpose of heart," to count him "all our salvation and all our desire," this is what God requires; this is also what our blessed Saviour merits at our hands; and if we despise not even life itself when standing in competition with his will, his presence, his glory, we shall be regarded as denying him, and must expect to be denied by him in the presence of his Father and his holy angels[g]. In the Church above "there is no need of either sun or moon to lighten it, because The Lamb is the light thereof[h];" so also is it in the Church below, wherever Christ has really established his kingdom in the heart[i]. Look to it then, Brethren, that it be thus with you: and, if you are disposed to ask, Who will shew me any good? learn immediately to add, "Lord, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon me; and that shall put more gladness in my heart, than any increase of corn or wine or oil can ever do[k]:" for, as, on the one hand, "A man's

[g] Mark viii. 34, 35, 38.
[h] Rev. xxi. 23.
[i] Isai. xxiv. 23.
[k] Ps. iv. 6, 7.

" A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things that he possesseth," so, on the other hand, " In God's favour is life, and his loving-kindness is better than life itself."]

CCCXXV.

THE BENEFIT OF VISITING THE SICK.

Job xxxiii. 23, 24. *If there be a Messenger with him, an Interpreter, one among a thousand, to shew unto man his uprightness, then he is gracious unto him, and saith, Deliver him from going down to the pit; I have found a ransom.*

ELIHU was not one of the particular friends of Job. He was a young man, who, on the occasion of Job's friends assembling together, had been admitted to hear rather than to speak. But when he had heard the repeated attempts of Job's friends to convince him of sin, and their incapacity to answer the arguments which Job had adduced, his spirit was stirred in him, and he determined to offer his opinion[a]. He was of a better spirit than Job's friends, and had a deeper insight into the dispensations of God's providence. He never accused Job of hypocrisy, as they had done; but he saw wherein he had erred, and endeavoured with fidelity to point it out to him. Job had certainly erred in two respects; in speaking too highly of himself, and too disrespectfully of God. To bring home to him these two faults, Elihu shews him, what he evidently was not sufficiently acquainted with, the ends and designs of God in afflicting man, namely to humble him, and to prepare him for those richer mercies which he has in reserve for every true penitent. There were various means whereby God prepared men for the knowledge of himself, and the enjoyment of his glory: one was by secret discoveries of himself in dreams and visions: another was by laying them on a bed of affliction, and sending some well-informed servant to instruct them. It is of this latter mode that Elihu speaks in the words before

[a] Job xxxii. 6—10.

before us: from which we are naturally led to shew you,

I. The office of those who visit the sick—

A person who in a spirit of love visits the chambers of the sick, is "a Messenger" from the Most High God, and "an Interpreter" of his holy will: and one who delights in that office, and is duly qualified for the performance of it, is indeed a rare and valuable character, justly styled "One among a thousand." The object which such a person should bear in view is briefly stated in our text; it is "to shew unto man his uprightness."

But *whose* uprightness is here intended? *the man's own?* Most assuredly not. Such a visitor as this would be neither rare nor valuable. It is the common language of ignorant persons when visiting a dying friend, to say, "You have nothing to fear: you have been *upright* and honest in the world: you have fulfilled all your duties in life: and there is no doubt but that you are accepted of God." Such a visitor as this is indeed "a Messenger;" but it is "a Messenger of Satan," to beguile and ruin an immortal soul. For, what is such language as this, but to speak peace when there is no peace, or, as the prophet strongly expresses, it to "sew pillows to the arm-holes of one that ought to be awakened from his delusions, and to "daub with untempered mortar a wall that is just ready to fall[b]?"

The uprightness that is to be pointed out, is *God's*. But here we acknowledge, that the *precise* import of the passage is not easy to be determined. Various are the senses which commentators have affixed to the word: but, if we would obtain just views of the Scripture, we must not consider so much what sense any word will bear, as what agrees best with the context. Now we apprehend that the context duly attended to, will give us the exact meaning of this expression. Let us see what was the object which Elihu had in view. He considered Job

[b] Ezek. xiii. 10, 11, 18.

Job as faulty in two respects; first, in maintaining his own righteousness; and next, in complaining of God as harsh and unjust towards him[c]. "*In this*," says he to Job, "*thou art not just*." To counteract these two errors, he tells Job, that God had afflicted him on purpose to lead him to juster views both of himself and of his God: and *that he himself was sent as* "*a Messenger and Interpreter*" *to him*, "*one among a thousand*," *to expound this matter to him*; and to shew him "God's uprightness, or righteousness," first, *in punishing his sin*; and next, *in the way provided by him for the pardon of it*.

The visitor's office then is, to shew the righteousness of God,

1. In punishing sin—

[It is common for persons in affliction, especially if their afflictions be heavy, complicated, and of long continuance, to manifest an impatient spirit, and to account their trials severe. But every thought of this kind shews, how regardless they are of the hand from whence their trials proceed, and of their own extreme demerit, which, if justly viewed, would reconcile them to any dispensation which Almighty God might send. The invariable language of those who are truly humbled is, "Thou, Lord, hast punished me far less than my iniquities deserve:" "Thou art righteous in all that is come upon me:" "to thee belongeth righteousness; but unto me belongeth shame and confusion of face[d]." This truth had been before inculcated by Zophar[e]; and it is of great importance to be inculcated on all: for, "shall a living man complain? a man for the punishment of his sins[f]?" No: he must be brought to "accept the punishment of his iniquity," and to say, "I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him[g]." There must be no "replying against God:" "the clay must not contend with the potter:" the frame to which every sufferer must be brought is this; "It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him good:" and it is a very important part of a visitor's office to bring him to it, by shewing, that any thing short of "everlasting burnings is a *mercy* for which we have reason to be *thankful*, and not a *judgment* of which we have any reason to complain; since it is light in comparison of what we deserve, and is sent on purpose to keep us from ever suffering our full desert.]

2. In his way of pardoning sin—

[This we confess, appears at first sight a forced construction of

[c] ver. 8—12. [d] See Ezr. ix. 13. Neh. ix. 33. Dan. ix. 7.
[e] Job xi. 6. [f] Lam. iii. 39. [g] Mic. vii. 9.

of the passage: but, on a nearer inspection of it we shall see reason to believe, that it is indeed the true import. The uprightness of God in *punishing* sin seems undoubtedly the *first and leading sense;* but it must *include* a view of the way of salvation through the ransom paid for sinners, or else the immediate acceptance of the sinner through that ransom could not follow from it. In this view of the word "uprightness," or "righteousness", there is a striking coincidence between the text and a passage in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans; where the Apostle again and again mentions "the righteousness which is of God by faith," and represents Christ as "set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare God's *righteousness* for, or in, the remission of sins; to declare, I say, his *righteousness, that he might be just, and yet the Justifier* of him which believeth in Jesus[h]." Now on what occasion can it be so necessary to "shew a man this," as when he is in sick and dying circumstances, and speedily about to enter into the immediate presence of his God? Then in particular he is anxious to inquire, "What must I do to be saved?" and then must we return him the same answer as the Apostle did to the jailer, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved[i]."

This then is the special office of those who visit the sick, namely, to declare freely and fully the way of salvation through a crucified Redeemer. They should act in the chambers of the sick precisely as Moses did in the camp of Israel, when thousands were dying of the wounds inflicted by the fiery flying serpents: they should erect in the sight of the dying penitent the brazen serpent, and say, "Look unto it and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth[k]!" They should encourage the afflicted soul to look unto Christ even "at the eleventh hour;" and to declare plainly, that "all who believe in him are justified from all things[l]." Then indeed will they approve themselves faithful "Messengers" from God, and just "Interpreters" of his mind and will: and every such Messenger is of inestimable value, and fitly called, "One among a thousand."]

Such being the blessed office of a Visitor, let us contemplate,

II. The benefit arising from a faithful discharge of it—

Doubtless in many instances, little, if any, good arises from efforts made in the chambers of the sick: and often the hopeful appearances that begin there, vanish

[h] Rom. iii. 21, 22, 25, 26. [i] Acts xvi. 30, 31.
[k] Compare Isai. xlv. 22. with John iii. 14, 15.
[l] Acts xiii. 39.

vanish speedily, "as the early dew, or as the morning cloud." But in many instances the labours of Visitors are productive of the greatest good;

1. Even to the bodies of men—

[We speak not now of pecuniary relief, and of its effects on the recovery of many from their disorders, (though we ought not by any means to lose sight of that;) it is solely of the spiritual office of the Visitor that we speak; and we affirm, that the bodies of men often derive incalculable benefit from it. Of disorders, some purely belong to the body; and others are greatly influenced by the mind, or perhaps originate altogether from it. Now in reference to the former of these, it is certain, that spiritual instruction will not operate as a charm upon the body: but if, under the pressure of temporal affliction, the mind be disquieted by impatience and fretfulness, those agitations will have a very unfavourable aspect on the body, and will greatly impede the cure of the disorder; and consequently, the composing of the mind, the bringing of it to a state of resignation and submission, and particularly to a state of peace with God, will exceedingly promote the recovery of the body; so true is it that "A merry heart doth good like a medicine[m]." But if, as in the latter case, the disorder is very intimately connected with the mind, (and how many nervous disorders arise from the pressure of worldly troubles!) it is obvious, that the Spiritual Physician may be more useful than a Medical Attendant; since by administering "the balm of Gilead" to the soul, he applies his remedy to the root of the disorder, and gains access to that which no earthly prescription can reach. And more especially if, as sometimes happens, the bodily health has declined through apprehensions of God's wrath, and the influence of desponding fears, the free and full exhibition of God's mercy in Christ Jesus is the *only* remedy that is at all *suited* to the case; and the restoration of peace to the soul is, in fact, "health to the navel, and marrow to the bones[n]." "A faithful ambassador," says Solomon, "is health[o]."]

2. More especially to their souls—

[How many are there who never began to think of their souls, till they were visited with sickness, or brought down by some heavy affliction! "Before they were afflicted they went astray:" but God having sent to them some kind Messenger, some able Interpreter, has led them by his means to a consideration of their state, and to a true and saving repentance. No man has ever

[m] It sometimes happens, that the life of a person is actually preserved, *solely* under God, by the composure of the mind. A most remarkable instance of this the author has in his own parish.

[n] Prov. iii. 8. [o] Prov. xiii. 17.

ever executed with fidelity the office of which we are speaking, without having seen some fruit of his labour: and we will venture to appeal to such persons, (for *they* are the *only* competent judges,) whether they have not been sometimes eye-witnesses of the very scene described in our text? Have they not seen the afflicted soul comforted; and peace abounding in the conscience that was recently overwhelmed with desponding fears? Has not God said, as it were, in their very presence, "Deliver that drooping sinner from going down to the pit: I have found a ransom?" And have they not seen the person, who but just before dared not to lift up his eyes unto heaven, "praying unto God," and made sensible "of his favour," and "beholding the face of his reconciled God with joy[p]?" Yes; this is no uncommon sight: and whoever will lend himself diligently to this good work, shall have the happiness of dispensing these blessings, and of having some poor sinners to be his joy and crown of rejoicing in the day of judgment.]

REFLECTIONS—

1. How honourable an office is that of a Visitor of the Sick!

[This office, though highly proper to be executed by Ministers, ought by no means to be confined to them. True, such a person, duly qualified and thoroughly in earnest, is "One among a thousand:" but it were better, if possible, that there should be ten or twenty such amongst a thousand: and most assuredly it is the duty of every one, according to his ability and opportunities, to engage in it; since the execution of it is a very principal fruit and evidence of "pure and undefiled religion[q]." We would call on all therefore in their respective stations to consider how they may execute this office to the utmost possible advantage. And let all know, for their encouragement, that, if they receive not honour from their fellow-creatures for these self-denying exertions, they shall certainly ere long be honoured and rewarded by their God[r].]

2. How blind are they who are averse to have such pious instructors introduced to their sick and dying friends!

[There exists in the minds of many an idea, that religious conversation will prove injurious to a person on a bed of sickness; and that, by the anxiety that it will create, it will retard, rather than accelerate, a restoration to health. Now, if in any instance this should be the case, it may justly be said, that some risk of injury to the body would be but a small sacrifice for the obtaining of spiritual instruction under such circumstances: for, who can reflect

[p] ver. 26. [q] Jam. i. 27. [r] Matt. xxv. 35, 36.

reflect on a soul perishing in ignorance and sin, and not see the indispensible necessity of plucking it as a brand out of the burning, ere yet it be gone beyond a hope of recovery? Methinks, if a certainty of some injury to the bodily health were put in the scale against the near and almost certain prospect of dying in an unconverted state, there can be no doubt which should preponderate: no man that knows the value of an immortal soul, can hesitate which alternative to choose. But such cases, if they exist at all, are very rare: the mind of an ungodly man is not so easily moved; nor are the emotions that may be excited so injurious as worldly vexation or worldly care: they do not prey upon the mind, as carnal feelings do. Religious feelings, even where they are not altogether of the best kind, have rather a tendency to compose the mind; inasmuch as they generate a hope in God, and open prospects of progressive improvement and of ultimate salvation. But we will not rest this matter upon the dictates either of reason or experience: God himself shall determine it: and he says, "Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him[s]." Doubtless it is expedient for the Visitor to consult the weakness of the patient: but it is the height of cruelty to deny to those who are going into the presence of their God, the means of obtaining that wedding-garment that can alone make them acceptable guests at the marriage-supper of the Lamb.]

3. How desirable is it to support such a Society as this!

[——— [t] But how can they execute their functions, if not aided by pecuniary contributions? The poor, if some relief can be afforded them in their sickness, will *on that account* welcome the Visitor as "a Messenger" from heaven: and, having received him as "a Messenger," they will be disposed to listen to him as "an Interpreter." It cannot be supposed, that the Visitors can effect much in this way from their own individual resources: it must be through the liberality of the public alone that this plan can be executed to any great extent. Let the hearts of all then be open on this occasion. If we pleaded only for the *temporal* relief of our poorer brethren in a time of sickness, we should feel that we had a claim upon your charity: but the *temporal* relief is of small importance when compared with that which we contemplate, *the instruction and salvation of the soul.* Bear this in mind; and let your contributions shew in what light you appreciate an immortal soul. Multitudes who would otherwise die in ignorance and sin may by these means be rescued from perdition: and, if our blessed Lord came down from heaven to "ransom" them by his own blood, let it be a light matter in your eyes to contribute liberally of your substance

[s] Jam. v. 13. [t] Here state the nature and plan of the Society.

substance for the purpose of making known to them that "ransom," and thereby "delivering them from going down to the pit."]

CCCXXVI.

NATURE AND EFFICACY OF REPENTANCE.

Job xxxiii. 27, 28. *He looketh upon men; and if any say, I have sinned, and perverted that which was right, and it profited me not; he will deliver his soul from going into the pit, and his life shall see the light.*

GOD is often pleased to make use of affliction as the means of bringing persons to a right mind: and where he has sent any affliction as a chastisement for some particular sin, it is probable that on our repentance he will remove the chastisement[a]. But we must not always associate the ideas of affliction and punishment, or of repentance and recovery, so as to conclude every person wicked in proportion to the calamities that may come upon him. This was the error which occasioned the whole controversy between Job and his friends. They conceived, that, by visiting him with such accumulated afflictions, God designed to point him out as an hypocrite: and, upon that presumption, they exhorted him to repent, and assured him that on his repentance God would restore to him his former health and prosperity. In support of their argument they spoke many valuable truths; but they erred in the extent to which they carried those truths, and in the application which they made of them to the case of Job. The fact is, that "no man knoweth love or hatred by all that is before him: all things come alike to all[b]:" and the inequalities which we observe in the dispensations of Providence will all be rectified in the day of judgment, which is on that very account denominated, "The day of the revelation of the righteous judgment of God[c]." We shall therefore drop that which we apprehend to be the primary meaning of these words, because *in that sense* they are not true to the extent

[a] Jam. v. 14, 15. [b] Eccl. ix. 1, 2. [c] Rom. ii. 5.

extent that Elihu designed them. We doubt not but that the most righteous persons may be reduced by sickness, and that the most penitent persons may have their sickness continued unto death. Fully persuaded of this, we shall not insist upon our text in reference to bodily sickness and recovery, but simply in reference to the concerns of the soul. In this view of the words, they point out to us,

I. The nature of repentance—

Few consider properly the nature of repentance. It does not consist in a mere acknowledgment that we are sinners, or in a dread of the consequences of our sin; but in a deep and humbling view of sin,

1. As unreasonable—

[The law of God is right[d]; it is "holy, and just, and good[e]." And whoever views its requisitions with an impartial eye, must of necessity confess them to be most highly reasonable. Who can doubt one moment the reasonableness of the creature serving his Creator; or of the sinner feeling gratitude to his Redeemer? Who does not see the propriety of having the bodily appetites in subjection to the nobler faculties of reason and conscience; and of governing our lives in reference to eternity, rather than to the poor vanities of time and sense? The most ignorant and most prejudiced person cannot but acknowledge that these things are "*right*."

Now what is the life of the generality, but a direct opposition to all this, or, in other words, "a perversion of that which is right?" We speak not now concerning gross sins, but concerning that kind of life which even the most moral and decent live: they forget their God; they disregard their Saviour; they live as if they thought the salvation of their souls a matter of only secondary importance.

A penitent, when he comes to a just sense of his condition, views things in this light: he is ready to exclaim with Agur, "Surely I am more brutish than any man, and have not the understanding of a man[f]." He is amazed that God should have borne with him so long in the midst of his perverseness: and there are no terms too humiliating for him to adopt in order to express his shame and self-abhorrence before God.]

2. As unprofitable—

[All expect that sin will profit them in some respect or other; and the gratifications purchased by it are considered as more

[d] Ps. xix. 7, 9. [e] Rom. vii. 12. [f] Prov. xxx. 2.

more than an equivalent for any consequences that may ensue from it.

This delusion often lasts for a considerable time: but, when a person begins to turn unto God, the scales fall from his eyes; he sees, that, if he had gained the whole world, it would have been an unprofitable bargain for his immortal soul. He feels himself much in the state that our first parents were after their fall. What Satan had promised them was indeed true in some sense: "their eyes were opened; and they did discern good and evil;"[e] but it was *good* which they had *lost*, and *evil* which they had *incurred*. Ah! how unprofitable did their sin now appear! for one taste of the forbidden fruit to sacrifice their innocence and the favour of their God! If we contemplate their feelings when they were driven out of Paradise, we shall form some idea of what a penitent feels, when once he comes to a just apprehension of his state. His *folly* appears to him even greater than his *guilt*. He now begins to understand those words, "*Madness* is in their hearts while they live[g]:" and he feels the full force of that pointed interrogation, "What fruit had ye then of those things whereof ye are now ashamed[h]?"]

That we may not be discouraged by this view of repentance, let us contemplate,

II. The benefits of it—

We have before assigned our reasons for declining to notice our text in reference to a recovery from bodily sickness: on that subject we could promise you nothing with any certainty: but in reference to spiritual benefits, we do not hesitate to promise you,

1. Deliverance from condemnation—

[Besides "the pit" of the grave, there is also a pit into which sinners must be cast, even "the bottomless pit," the miserable abode of Satan and his angels[i]. Into that pit your soul shall never come. The impenitent alone shall have their portion there. The word and oath of Jehovah are pledged to rescue you from hence. "He has found a ransom[k]:" the ransom has been paid: and God (if we may so speak) would violate his engagements with his Son, if he were to spurn from his footstool one who came to him in the name of Jesus[l]. But you need not be afraid; for this is his own gracious declaration: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness[m]:" and again, "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper; but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy[n]."

Perhaps

[e] Eccl. ix. 3. [g] Rom. vii. 21. [i] Rev. xx. 1—3. [k] ver. 24.
[l] Rom. iii. 26. [m] 1 John i. 9. [n] Prov. xxviii. 13.

Perhaps from a retrospect of your past lives you may be led to fear that you have sinned beyond the reach of mercy: but there is no ground for despondency, even to the vilest of mankind: the blood of Christ is sufficient to cleanse from all sin, however heinous[o]; and the promises of acceptance through him are so extensive as to preclude all possibility of doubt to those who humbly rely upon them[p].]

2. Exaltation to glory—

[The light of God's reconciled countenance shall certainly be enjoyed by the penitent *in this world*; "his light shall rise in obscurity, and his darkness shall become as the noon-day." But who can conceive that "light" which he shall enjoy in the world to come? The highest joys which the soul can experience here, are no more in comparison of heaven, than a taper is of the meridian sun. *There* "the sun shall not be our light by day, neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto us; but the Lord shall be to us an everlasting light, and our God our glory. Our sun shall no more go down, neither shall our moon withdraw itself; but the Lord shall be our everlasting light, and the days of our mourning shall be ended[q]." There may be many dark nights, and tremendous storms, before we arrive at the full consummation of our happiness: but the word is sure, that, "if we sow in tears, we shall reap in joy[r]."]

We may LEARN from hence,

1. What encouragement we have to repent—

[God represents himself in the text as "looking upon men:" he is looking continually to see if he can find an object towards whom he can exercise mercy consistently with the honour of his other perfections. The father, in the parable, is described as looking out, as it were, with an ardent desire for the return of his prodigal son, and as running towards him as soon as ever he beheld him a great way off. This gives us a just idea of the tender compassions of our God, who "willeth not the death of any sinner, but rather that he should turn from his wickedness and live." We have a still livelier representation of this in the prophet Jeremiah[s]: and we may with great propriety conceive of God as looking wishfully upon us at this moment, and saying, "O that they would hearken unto my voice[t]!" "Wilt thou not be made clean? When shall it once be[u]?" Be persuaded, my Brethren, that God is now "waiting to be gracious unto you:" and that if you turn unto him, he will have mercy upon you[x], yea, he will make his "grace to abound even where sin has most abounded[y]."]

2. How

[o] 1 John i. 7. [p] Isai. i. 18. John vi. 37. [q] Isai. lx. 19, 20.
[r] Ps. cxxvi. 5, 6. [s] Jer. xxxi. 18, 20.
[t] Ps. lxxxi. 13—16. [u] Jer. xiii. 27.
[x] Isai. lv. 7. [y] Rom. v. 20.

2. How just will be the condemnation of the impenitent—

[God's direction to every one of us is, "Only acknowledge thine iniquity[z]." And what can he require of you less than this? Would you yourselves forgive an offending child, while he obstinately refused to acknowledge his fault? What then will you say to God in the day of judgment, when he shall refuse to admit you into the regions of light and bliss, and shall consign your souls over to that bottomless pit, from which you made no effort to escape? How pungent will be the recollection of those invitations and promises which you now despise! — — — O do not by your obstinate impenitence make work for everlasting and unavailing sorrow. Do but call to mind the mercy vouchsafed to David: the very instant he said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord," Nathan was inspired to reply, "The Lord hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die[a]." And this affecting incident David himself records for the encouragement of all to make supplication to their God: "I said, I will confess my sin unto the Lord; and so thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin[b]." Surely, if such an example, joined to the gracious declarations in the text do not lead you to repentance, your mouths will be shut in the day of judgment, and (whatever you may now do) you will acknowledge your condemnation to be just.]

[z] Jer. iii. 13. [a] 2 Sam. xii. 13. [b] Ps. xxxii. 5.

CCCXXVII.

THE SOURCE AND REMEDY OF DESPONDING FEARS.

Job xxxv. 14. *Although thou sayest thou shalt not see him, yet judgment is before him: therefore trust thou in him.*

IN controversy there is need of the utmost candour; nor without it can we ever hope for a favourable issue. The friends of Job were grievously defective in it; and therefore utterly failed, either to convince him, or to be convinced themselves. But Elihu, who was an attentive auditor of the dispute, and who, on account of his youth, judged it indecorous to offer his sentiments till he saw that his elders were silenced, took up the matter with incomparably better temper and judgment, and, instead of bringing railing and unfounded accusations as the others had done, called Job's attention to many expressions he had

had used, and endeavoured to convince him out of his own mouth. This was wise, and well adapted to the end proposed: and it is observable, that when God reproved the manner in which the other three had conducted the controversy, he said nothing to the disparagement of Elihu, nor required any sacrifice on his account. [c]

It is certain that Job, though far from being a hypocrite, as his friends had represented him, had not always spoken quite advisedly with his lips. His self-justification had been occasionally too strong, and his complaints of God's conduct towards him somewhat irreverent: he had yielded also too much to despondency. He had complained that he could not understand God's dealings with him, and that he had no hope or prospect of deliverance from his troubles[a]. This is noticed by Elihu in the words before us; and the proper remedy for such desponding fears is pointed out to him: "although thou sayest thou shalt not see God, yet judgment is before him; therefore trust thou in him;" that is, Place in God that confidence he deserves; and all will yet be well.

From the words thus explained we shall be led to consider,

I. The *source* of desponding fears—

There is far more of despondency in men than is generally supposed: perhaps it is, as much as any other thing whatever, a ground of their continuing impenitent in their sins.

The *ostensible* ground of men's fears is usually a sense of the extreme difficulty of their case—

[Thus it was with Israel at the Red Sea, at the waters of Marah, at the borders of Canaan also, when the spies represented the cities as impregnable, and the inhabitants as irresistible. Thus it was even with the pious Hezekiah, when his sickness appeared to be unto death[aa]: and thus it is with multitudes amongst ourselves, who imagine that their circumstances are so calamitous, as to be beyond the reach of any remedy. More particularly is this the case with persons under spiritual trouble: they are apt to imagine, that their sins are unpardonable, and that their corruptions are too inveterate ever to be subdued — — —]

The

[a] Ch. xxiii. 8, 9. [aa] Isai. xxxviii. 10—13.

The *real* ground is a low apprehension of the perfections of their God—

[This is the interpretation which God himself puts on the unbelieving fears of his people. When Sarah laughed at the promise made to her, the answer was, "Is there any thing too hard for the Lord?" and the complaint of God against the unbelieving Israelites was, that "they limited the Holy One of Israel." In fact, a just view of God's perfections would silence all fears: for if his wisdom, his power, his love, his faithfulness be really infinite, we have nothing to do, but to repose our confidence in him, and we are safe———]

But it is a small thing to know the source of desponding fears, unless we apply,

II. The remedy—

This is prescribed in the words of our text:

1. Contemplate God—

[What we are to understand by that expression, "Judgment is before him," may be ascertained by consulting a similar passage in the prophet Isaiah[b]. He will do nothing but what is right and good; nor will he omit any thing which it becomes him to do.

Consider what he has done in a way of power and grace——— and is he not the same God as ever?

Consider what he has engaged to do: is there any thing that we can need, which is not made over to us by an express promise? Has he not said, that "his grace shall be sufficient for us;" that "we shall have no temptation without a way to escape;" that "as our day is, so shall our strength be;" that "he will give grace and glory, and withhold no good thing" from his believing people? "Hath he then said these things, and will he not do them? hath he spoken, and will he not make them good?"

Consider, above all, the gift of his only dear Son! What else will he, or can he, withhold from us[c]? Surely he will be "a strength to the poor, a strength to the needy in his distress, a refuge from the storm, a shadow from the heat, when the blast of the terrible ones is as a storm against the wall[d]."

Did we but duly consider his glorious perfections as already exercised for his people, and as specially pledged to be exercised for us, we should never entertain a doubt of his constant and effectual care. "His name would be to us as a strong tower, to which we should run, and be safe."]

2. Trust

[b] Isai. xxx. 18. [c] Rom. viii. 32. [d] Isai. xxv. 4.

2. Trust in him—

[" They that know his name will trust in him:" and to trust in him is the certain way to dissipate all fear. See how a confidence in God operated in the case of David[dd]: and the same effect will it produce in us: " if we commit our ways to him, our very thoughts," (which are by nature fluctuating as the wind,) " shall be established." This then is what we must do: we must " cast all our care on Him who careth for us." It is the very direction which God himself gives to " those who walk in darkness and have no light[e]:" and if we follow this direction, " God will keep us in perfect peace[f];" and we shall be as Mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but standeth fast for ever[g]."]

ADDRESS,

1. To those who overlook difficulties—

[This is the habit of men in general: and hence it is that they are so much at their ease. But it is no easy matter to turn to God aright. To repent and to believe in Christ are works far beyond the ability of man; nor can any man do either the one or the other, but by the influence of the Holy Ghost[h]. O let this be duly weighed! Let us remember, that " we cannot even say that Jesus is the Lord," (we cannot feelingly and believingly say it,) " but by the Holy Ghost[i]:" and let us not delay one hour to seek his effectual aid.]

2. To those who unduly magnify them—

[We certainly magnify our difficulties too much, when we deem them insuperable: for " the things that are impossible with man are possible with God." See the state of Jonah in the whale's belly: could any be conceived more hopeless? Yet from thence did he cry, and his prayer entered into the ears of the Lord of Hosts[k]. Thus let us " never stagger at the promises of God through unbelief, but be strong in faith, giving glory to God[l]." The greater our difficulties, let our application to him be the more earnest, and our expectations of his gracious interposition be the more enlarged: " Be of good courage, and he shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the Lord[m]."]

[dd] Ps. xlvi. 1—3. & Ps. xi. 1—4.
[e] Isai. l. 10.
[f] Isai. xxvi. 3.
[g] Ps. cxxv. 1.
[h] Acts v. 31. Phil. i. 29.
[i] 1 Cor. xii. 3.
[k] Jonah ii. 1—7.
[l] Rom. iv. 20.
[m] Ps. xxxi. 24.

CCCXXVIII.

HYPOCRISY EXPOSED.

Job xxxvi. 13. *The hypocrites in heart heap up wrath.*

SUFFERINGS are to the soul what the furnace is to gold; they serve to ascertain the measure of its purity or its corruption. If under the pressure of them we humble ourselves before God, and correct whatever we may find to have been amiss, they will promote at once the renovation of our nature, and the honour of him by whose gracious providence they are laid upon us: but, if we murmur at them, and rebel against our God, they will betray a heart unsound and hypocritical. As to the measure of *temporal* advantage that shall accrue to those who patiently endure the Lord's will, or to the *temporal* miseries that shall be sustained by hypocrites, we apprehend that Elihu, as well as the three friends of Job, was, though in a less measure than they, mistaken: but as to the *eternal* consequences of uprightness or hypocrisy, he was perfectly correct: "The hypocrites in heart heap up wrath."

This expression is deserving of the most attentive consideration. But so to delineate the hypocrisy of the heart, as neither to encourage an undue confidence by distinctions that are inadequate, nor to wound the feelings of the upright by too refined distinctions, is a work of great difficulty. We will however, in dependence on God's help, attempt it; and will proceed to describe,

I. The characters here mentioned—

The heart is the seat both of uprightness and hypocrisy: the upright are, "the upright in heart;" and the hypocrites, "the hypocrites in heart." Of those whose hypocrisy is gross and glaring, we shall forbear to speak[a]. We will rather draw your attention to those whose religion is,

1. Formal and vain-glorious—

[The

[a] See two most extraordinary instances; Ishmael, Jer. xli. 2—7, (N.B. *his weeping*); and Johanan, Jer. xlii. 1—6, 20.

[The religion of many consists in an outward respect for certain forms, which, though not necessary in themselves, they think it expedient to observe, in order to maintain a reputation for piety, and to set a good example to the lower orders of the community. Different degrees of strictness obtain among them in relation to these things: some of a more zealous cast, say, as it were, "Come, and see my zeal for the Lord:" whilst others are contented with the round of duties, to satisfy their own consciences, and to enable them to say, "What lack I more?" But in all this there is nothing of regard for God: it is hypocrisy altogether: and hence our blessed Lord, speaking of such characters, says, "*Ye hypocrites*, well did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, This people draw near unto me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me[aa]."]

2. Partial and temporary—

[Certain occasions sometimes arise to excite men to diligence in seeking after God: and, if the making of some particular sacrifices would suffice, they would willingly pay the price. But to "follow the Lord fully," to give up themselves to him without reserve, to "be stedfast and immoveable, and always abounding in the work of the Lord," this is more than they can consent to: and, when required to do these things, they, like the rich youth in the Gospel, renounce all hope in Christ, rather than forego the things to which their carnal hearts are more attached. Under the pressure of some heavy affliction, they are like men in a storm; who will rather throw overboard their provisions and the tackling of the ship, than suffer the ship to sink: but they cast not out their sins on account of the hatred they bear to them, but only from an apprehension, that, if not cast away, they will operate to the destruction of their souls: and, when the storm is over, they will be as ready as ever to return to their former habits. But all this argues an unsoundness of principle; and proceeds from hypocrisy in the heart. So the Scriptures uniformly declare[b]———and so it will assuredly be found in the last day[c].]

3. Weak and ineffectual—

[The object of all religion is, to renew and sanctify the soul: and, if it produce not this effect, it is of no avail. The delivering of us from gross immoralities is but half its work: it must purge the soul from all allowed evil, of whatever kind it be. If our religion prevail not to overcome our high thoughts of ourselves[d], and uncharitable censures of others[e]; if it do not enable us to govern

[aa] Matt. xv. 7, 8.

[b] Hos. v. 15. & vi. 4. & vii. 16. Isai. xxvi. 16. Ps. lxxviii. 34—37. See especially Job xxvii. 8—10.

[c] Matt. vii. 22, 23. [d] Hab. ii. 4. [e] Matt. vii. 3—5.

govern and controul our tongues[f], and indeed to rescue us from the dominion of every known sin, we are under a delusion, and deceive ourselves to our eternal ruin[g]. It matters not how high our pretensions may have been, or how exalted our reputation; the mask will at last be taken from our face, and our degradation be proportioned to the eminence from which we fall[h]. The stony-ground hearers are not saved by their transient joys; nor are the thorny-ground hearers accepted on account of their stinted fruits: those only approve themselves truly upright, who bring forth fruit unto perfection, and "have respect unto all the commandments[l]."]

Little are such characters aware, what is indeed,

II. Their melancholy employment—

Every sinner may properly be said to be "treasuring up wrath against the day of wrath[k]": but this is more particularly the case with hypocrites; because,

1. Their sins are more heinous than those of others—

[*They are more insulting to the Majesty of heaven.*—The sins of all are heinous, inasmuch as they trample on the authority of God: but hypocrites pour contempt upon him: they say, in their hearts, "Tush, God shall not see:" "the thick clouds are a covering to him:" he cannot discern good from evil, but may be imposed on, like any of us." But how offensive must such thoughts be to the heart-searching God! and how greatly must they aggravate the guilt of any sins committed by us!

They are also more injurious to the Divine honour.—Those who make no profession of religion may do what they will, and God is not dishonoured, any farther than as his authority is set at nought: but when a man pretending to be religious betrays his hypocrisy, the world cry out against God himself, "blaspheming his holy name[l]," and calumniating his blessed Gospel[m].

They are also more destructive to our fellow-creatures.—Sins committed by others, pass unheeded; but committed by them, are made stumbling-blocks to the whole world. It is surprising how the ungodly triumph on such occasions; "There, there, so would we have it! they are all hypocrites alike; religion is only an empty name; and they are most honest and most to be depended on, who discard it altogether."

Thus the sins of hypocrites are really more aggravated as to their

[f] Jam. i. 26.
[g] Mark ix. 43—48.
[h] Job xx. 4—7. with xxxiii. 14.
[i] Matt. xiii. 19—23. Ps. cxix. 6.
[k] Rom. ii. 5.
[l] 2 Sam. xii. 14.
[m] 2 Pet. ii. 2.

their guilt than others, and therefore entail on those who commit them a heavier condemnation.]

2. Their best actions, as well as their worst, augment their guilt before God—

[If they come into the house of God, and offer the most costly sacrifices, they still only heap up wrath against the day of wrath[n]. God abhors their very best services[o], and accounts them no better than "the cutting off a dog's neck, or offering him swines' blood[p]." "Their most common actions also, which have no reference to religion, are hateful to him: "the very ploughing of the wicked is sin[q]." Thus wherever they are, and whatever they do, they are only swelling the number of their sins, and treasuring up for themselves a more accumulated load of misery to all eternity. Unhappy people! they think perhaps, or may even be confident, that all is well with them; whilst yet their one employment is to add sin to sin in this world, and misery to misery in the world to come. And hence the portion of hypocrites is represented as that which is more terrible than any that will be assigned to any other class of sinners whatever[qq].]

INFER—

1. What need is there for self-examination!

[This is the improvement which God himself teaches us to make of this subject[r]. O search and try yourselves with all possible care: and, knowing how deceitful the heart is, beg of God to "search and try it for you, that you may "see if there be *any* wicked way in you, and may be led in the way everlasting[s]."]

2. How earnestly should we pray for the renewing influences of the Holy Spirit!

[So did David[t]; and so should we do. The old nature, however corrected, is corrupt still: we must be "created anew in Christ Jesus," and "be renewed in the spirit of our minds." To "take away the heart of stone, and to give us hearts of flesh," is God's work. O cry to him for it: and be not satisfied with "a name to live, whilst you are really dead;" lest, like the foolish virgins, you be found destitute of that grace, which can alone prepare you for the coming of the heavenly Bridegroom.]

3. How happy are they who have experienced a work of grace in their souls!

[These

[n] Prov. xxi. 27. [o] Isai. i. 11—15. [p] Isai. lxvi. 3.
[q] Prov. xxi. 4. [qq] Matt. xxiv. 51. [r] Gal. vi. 3—5.
[s] Ps. cxxxix. 23, 24. [t] Ps. li. 10.

[These are accepted in all that they do; their prayers, their tears, their sighs, their groans, yea, their very thoughts are all recorded in the book of God's remembrance, and shall be brought forth to augment the eternal weight of glory provided for them[u]. Ye then who are cleaving with full purpose of heart unto the Lord, and striving really to glorify him in all things, rejoice in the prospects that are before you: and "keep your hearts with all diligence," that ye may be found "Israelites indeed, in whom is no guile," and "may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God."]

[u] Ps. xv. 1, 2. with Mal. iii. 16, 17.

CCCXXIX.

TRUE HUMILIATION.

Job xl. 4. *Behold, I am vile!*

THESE are the words of a man whom God had pronounced "perfect and upright." As a fallen descendant of Adam, he partook of the corruption of our common nature: but as a Child of God, he was one of the most eminent of all the human race. It may be thought indeed, that this confession of his proved him to have been guilty of some enormous crime; but it evinced rather his great advancement in the Divine life, and his utter abhorrence of all evil. Doubtless there was just occasion for this acknowledgment, because he had transgressed with his lips in arraigning the conduct of Providence towards him: but, if they were suited to his case, much more are they so to all those who possess not his high attainments.

We shall consider the words as expressing,

I. A discovery then made—

Job had certainly low views of himself upon the whole[a]: yet he had spoken in too unqualified terms in vindication of his own character[b]. Instances of this Elihu had brought to his remembrance[c]; and God himself testified against him in this respect[d]. Job had

[a] Job ix. 20, 30, 31. [b] Job x. 6, 7. & xvi. 17.
[c] Job xxxii. 2. & xxxiii. 8—12. & xxxv. 2.
[d] Job xxxviii. 2. & xl. 2, 8.

had repeatedly expressed his wish, that God would admit him, as it were, to a conference; and had expressed his confidence that he could maintain his cause before him[e]; but now that God did interpose, he saw how much he had erred, and that all his former confidence was presumption. He now saw,

1. That his conduct had been sinful—

[Being conscious of the integrity of his heart in relation to the things which his friends had laid to his charge, he had done right in maintaining his innocence before them: but he had erred in maintaining it *to the extent* he did; he had erred in imagining that he had not merited at God's hands the calamities inflicted on him; and, above all, in complaining of God as acting unjustly and cruelly towards him. These workings of his heart he now saw to be exceeding sinful, as betraying too high thoughts of himself, and great irreverence towards the God of heaven and earth, "in whose sight the very heavens are not clean, and who chargeth his angels with folly." This sin therefore he now bitterly bewailed.]

2. That his whole heart was sinful—

[He did not view his conduct as a mere insulated act; but took occasion, from the fruit which had been produced, to examine the root from which it sprang. He now traced the bitter waters to their fountain-head, and discovered thereby the bitterness of the spring from whence they flowed. This was altogether a new discovery to him: he had no conception how desperately wicked his heart was, and that the evils he had committed would have broke forth with ten thousand times greater violence, if they had not been restrained by the grace of God. The rebellion of which he had been guilty now proved indisputably to him, that he was of himself as prone to sin as any of the human race, and that, if he differed from the vilest of mankind, he had nothing to boast of, since he had not made himself to differ, nor did he possess any thing which he had not received as the free gift of God[f]. This is the true way of estimating any individual sin[g]———and in this way alone shall we ever attain a just knowledge of ourselves.]

But we must further view his words as expressing,

II. An acknowledgment of the truth then discovered—

"Out of the abundance of his heart his mouth spake."

[e] Job xxiii. 1—5. & xxxi. 35—37. [f] 1 Cor. iv. 7.
[g] Ps. li. 3, 5. Mark vii. 21, 23.

spake." Feeling his sinfulness, it was an ease, rather than a pain, to him to confess it before God and man. Behold here,

1. The ingenuousness of his confession—

[Here were no excuses made, nor any suggestions offered to extenuate his guilt. He might have pleaded the weight of his sufferings, and the falseness of the accusations brought against him: but he saw that nothing can excuse sin, and that, whatever palliatives may be adduced to lessen its enormity in the sight of man, it is most hateful in the sight of God, and ought to abase us in the dust before him. That his sin on this occasion was an exception to his general conduct, did not at all change, in his estimation, the malignity of it: on the contrary, the enormity of it would appear in proportion to the mercies he had before received, and to the profession of piety he had before maintained.

Now thus it is that we also should acknowledge our vileness before God. Doubtless there may be circumstances which may greatly aggravate our transgressions; and these it will be at all times proper to notice: but it is never wise to look on the side that leads to a palliation of sin: self-love is so rooted in our hearts, that we shall always be in danger of forming too favourable a judgment of ourselves: the humiliation of the Publican is that which at all times befits us: nor can we ever be in a more becoming state than when, with Job, we "repent and abhor ourselves in dust and ashes."]

2. The dispositions with which it was accompanied—

[He submitted to reproof, and acknowledged himself guilty in relation to the very thing that was laid to his charge. This is a good test of true and genuine repentance. It is easy to acknowledge the sinfulness of our nature; but for a man, after long and strenuously maintaining his integrity, to confess his fault before the very people who have vehemently accused him, is no small attainment: yet did Job confess, that he had repeatedly offended, both in justifying himself, and in condemning God. Moreover, he declared his resolution, with God's help, to offend no more[h]: and by this he manifested beyond a doubt the reality and depth of his repentance. Of what use is that penitence that does not inspire us with a fixed purpose to sin no more? Humiliation without amendment is of no avail: "the repentance which is not to be repented of" produces such an indignation against sin, as will never leave us under the power of it any more[i]. May we all bear this in remembrance, and, by the entire change in our conduct, "approve ourselves in all things to be clear in this matter[k]!"]

ADDRESS,

[h] ver. 5. [i] 2 Cor. vii. 10, 11. [k] ib.

ADDRESS,

1. Those who entertain a good opinion of themselves—

[How is it possible that you should be right? Are you better than Job, who is represented by the Prophet as one of the most perfect characters that ever existed upon earth[l]? or if you were subjected to the same trials, would you endure them with more patience than he, of whom an Apostle speaks with admiration, saying, "Ye have heard of the patience of Job?" Know then, that, whilst you are indulging a self-righteous, self-complacent spirit, you betray an utter ignorance of your real state and character, and are altogether destitute of true repentance. Moreover, to you the Gospel is of no avail: for, what do you want of a Physician when you are not sick; or what of a Saviour, when you are not lost? O put away from you your Laodicean pride, lest you be rejected by God with indignation and abhorrence[m]. But if, notwithstanding this warning, you are determined to hold fast your confidence, then think whether "you will be strong in the day that God shall deal with you," or be able to stand before him as your Accuser and your Judge? Be assured, that if Job could not answer his God in this world, much less will you be able to do it in the world to come.]

2. Those who are humbled under a sense of their vileness——

[We bless God if you have been brought with sincerity of heart to say, "Behold, I am vile." If you feel your vileness as you ought, then will all the promises of the Gospel appear to you exactly suited to your state, and Christ be truly precious to your souls. Whom does he invite to come unto him, but the weary and heavy laden? What was the end for which he died upon the cross? Was it not to save sinners, even the chief? Yes, verily; "it is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation[n]"——— But whilst we would encourage all to come and wash away their sins in the fountain of his blood, we would caution all against turning the grace of God into licentiousness. Many, in acknowledging the depravity of their nature, make it almost an excuse for their sins. Their acknowledgments may be strong; but they are attended with no tenderness of spirit, no deep contrition, no real self-lothing and self-abhorrence. Brethren, above all things guard against such a state as this. Whilst you are ignorant of your vileness, there is hope that your eyes may be opened to see it, and your heart be humbled under a sense of it: but to acknowledge it and yet remain obdurate, is a fearful presage of final impenitence, and everlasting ruin[o]. If you

[l] Ezek. xiv. 14, 20.
[m] Rev. iii. 17, 18.
[n] 1 Tim. i. 15.
[o] Rev. xvi. 9, 11, 21.

you would be right, you must stand equally remote from presumption and despondency: your vileness must drive you, not from Christ, but to him; and when you are most confident of your acceptance with him, you must walk softly before him all the days of your life.]

CCCXXX.

JOB'S RESTORATION TO HEALTH AND PROSPERITY.

Job xlii. 10. *The Lord turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends.*

IF God himself had not interposed to determine the controversy between Job and his friends, it would have been extremely difficult for us to decide with any precision the points at issue between them. There was much of wisdom and of piety on all sides; and on all sides there was somewhat also to blame. Perhaps we should have thought that the fault of uncharitableness was chiefly on the side of Job's opponents: but yet, as they were three in number, whilst he stood alone, we should have been ready to bow to their authority, and to consider the scale as preponderating in their favour. However, happily for us, the difficulties are all removed by that infallible Umpire, to whom all the disputants appealed; and we are able to pronounce with certainty, that, both in temper and argument, Job had greatly the advantage of all his adversaries: nay, so far were they inferior to him in these respects, that they were commanded to request the intervention of his kind offices in their behalf, that through his intercession they might obtain pardon for their misconduct in the whole matter. In compliance with this command, they intreated an interest in Job's prayers; a favour instantly conferred, and productive of the happiest effects, as well to him who prayed, as to them for whom his prayers were desired: "The Lord turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends."

We shall conclude our remarks on the history and character of Job, by shewing

I. The

I. The office he performed—

The friends of Job had greatly offended God, by their mode of conducting their controversy with him—

[They imagined, that, whilst criminating or condemning Job, they were rendering an acceptable service to God: but they were in reality only provoking the Divine displeasure. On the contrary, their injured friend was regarded by God with an eye of pity and of love. This is a very instructive circumstance. *The many* are not always right in their views; nor *the confident*, in their assertions. The persecuted and afflicted saint whom they oppress may be right in opposition to them all. It can scarcely be conceived, how one false principle may warp the judgment even of good men; or to what erroneous conduct it may lead them. We cannot therefore but impress on all the necessity of guarding against the influence of prejudice or party zeal, and of maintaining in habitual exercise the united graces of diffidence and love. Charity in the heart is that which alone renders our most zealous services pleasing unto God; and, without it, whatever we may do or suffer for the Lord's sake, we are no better than sounding brass or tinkling cymbals[a].]

For their ignorance and uncharitableness, God required them to humble themselves before him—

[They were to bring their sacrifices, and to offer up burnt-offerings, in order to appease the wrath of their offended God: yea, they were also constrained to solicit the prayers of Job; nor would God pardon them, till his injured servant Job should have interceded with him in their behalf. Here, independent of the Mosaic law, the great doctrine of an atonement for sin was proclaimed; that doctrine which has been revealed with increasing clearness in all the types and prophecies of the Old Testament, and which is the one hope and consolation of every child of man. The persons who had transgressed were pious; and their sin was a sin of ignorance: yet must they present their burnt-offerings, in order to obtain mercy at the hands of God: from whence we may see, that not even the smallest sin, by whomsoever committed, can be pardoned, but through the blood of that all-sufficient sacrifice once offered upon Calvary: no penitence, no confession, no supplication will avail without that: "without shedding of blood there can be no remission[b]."

Moreover the duty and efficacy of intercession are here inculcated. It was not only for the honour of Job, or for the humiliation of his friends, that they were obliged to solicit his intercession for them: it was the design of God to shew, that every man needed the intercession of the saints; and that He who had appointed

[a] 1 Cor. xiii. 1—. [b] Heb. ix. 22.

appointed his only-begotten Son to be the Advocate of his people at the throne of glory, would hear their mutual supplications for each other at the throne of grace.

This office Job most gladly undertook. Instead of feeling any resentment on account of the injury he had sustained, he was penetrated with an affectionate solicitude to avert from them the Divine displeasure, and to bring down upon their souls a rich supply of all spiritual blessings. Whether Job officiated as their priest in offering the sacrifices, does not altogether appear: but as their intercessor, he succeeded far beyond his own most sanguine expectations.]

In his execution of this office we are particularly led to notice,

II. The benefit resulting to himself from the discharge of it—

A great and immediate change was wrought in Job's circumstances—

[His bondage and misery had extended to his mind, and body, and estate———and in relation to them all "his captivity was turned:" his flesh, which had been covered with a most lothsome and painful disease, was healed, and became "fresher than a little child's;" his mind, which had been agitated even to distraction, became calm and peaceful; and his friends who had all despised and forsaken him, united in making him such presents, as, through the peculiar blessing of God's providence, rendered him twice as rich as he had before been. The same number of sons and daughters also were in due time given him by God, and all such other blessings were added as tended to make him most happy in the enjoyment of them.]

By this instantaneous change, God rendered more manifest his decision of the controversy—

[Now it could no longer be doubted but that Job had been unjustly accused and unrighteously condemned[bb]. No less than four times does God himself designate Job by that honourable title, "My servant Job;" thereby attesting in his behalf, that, whatever infirmity he had shewn, he had indeed been upright before God, and had maintained a conscientious regard for God's honour. And though we cannot infer from this, that God will always interpose for the comfort of his people *in the same precise manner*, yet we may be assured, that sooner or later he will vindicate the honour of his saints, and "make their righteousness

[bb] The friends of Job had been most unreasonable in the testimonies they demanded: yet God had far exceeded them all. Job viii. 6, 7. & xxii. 22, 25.

ousness to shine forth as the noon-day." We need not therefore be cast down because of any present sufferings which we may be called to endure; for, if not in this world, yet certainly in the next, our meek submission to them shall be abundantly recompensed by our gracious God, "with whom it is a *righteous* thing to recompense tribulation to those who trouble us; and to us who are troubled, rest[c]."]

By this also he put honour on a forgiving spirit—

[The forgiveness of injuries done to us is required by God in order to his forgiveness of our iniquities[d]. It may at first appear a hard command, "Bless them that curse you, and pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you:" but who can behold the termination of Job's afflictions, and not see the blessedness of fulfilling that duty? Verily, whatever may be said of the sweetness of revenge, there is nothing so refreshing to the soul as to gain a victory over one's own spirit, and to exercise that disposition towards our brethren, which we ourselves hope to meet with in our offended God.]

IMPROVEMENT—

This subject very distinctly shews us,

1. The manner in which our sins are to be forgiven—

[We do not agree with those who represent Job as a type of Christ: but in this part of his history we certainly behold the way of acceptance with Almighty God: it is through the sacrifice and intercession of that Great High Priest, who has been especially ordained of God to be our Advocate and Mediator. By putting our cause into the hands of our blessed Lord and Saviour, we may all, even the vilest of the human race, obtain mercy with God: but there is no other way of coming unto God with even the smallest hope of mercy[e]——— Let us bear this in mind, and not lose sight of it for one moment. Let us set before our eyes the conduct of Job's friends in relation to this matter, and instantly unite in following their example. If we are too proud to seek reconciliation with God in the way which he has appointed, we can expect nothing but that "he will deal with us after our folly."]

2. The wisdom of waiting to see the end of God's dispensations—

[Job in the midst of his afflictions accounted God his enemy; but not so when he saw the termination of them. Thus we under our trials are ready to say, "All these things are against me:" but in how many instances have we seen reason to be ashamed of

[c] 2 Thess. i. 6, 7. [d] Matt. vi. 14, 15. & xviii. 35.
[e] John xiv. 6. Acts iv. 12.

of our precipitancy and unbelief! In how many instances have we found our trials to be the richest blessings in disguise, and have been constrained to acknowledge them all as the fruits of parental love! Let us then wait for the issue of our trials, before we presume to judge hardly of God on account of them. The history of Job was particularly intended to teach us this lesson, and to reconcile us to afflictive dispensations of whatever kind: "Behold, we count them happy that endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen *the end* of the Lord, that the Lord is very pitiful and of tender mercy[f]." Thus let but *the end* of our troubles be seen, and we shall bless and adore our God for every trial we have ever endured.]

3. The duty and efficacy of intercession—

[To enter fully into the wants and necessities of our fellow-creatures, and to spread them with earnestness before God in prayer, is no easy attainment: but, when this disposition is attained, and is put forth into lively exercise, it is replete with most incalculable benefit to the soul. Verily, if a person groaning under spiritual bondage himself, could stir up himself to make intercession for others, we believe that he would find no readier or more certain way to obtain deliverance for his own soul. At all events, to abound in this holy exercise is our duty[ff]: and we have all possible encouragement to perform it. The examples of Moses[g], of Elijah[h], and of the Church at Antioch[i], are sufficient to warrant a firm expectation that our prayers, if offered in faith, shall not go forth in vain. We are not however left to gather this is as an uncertain inference from former events: it is made the subject of a special promise to the saints in all ages: "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much[k]."]

[f] Jam. v. 11. [ff] 1 Tim. ii, 1.
[g] Numb. xii. 13. Deut. ix. 13, 14, 18, 19, 20, 26.
[h] Jam. v. 17, 18. [i] Acts xii. 5—17. [k] Jam. v. 15, 16.

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